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HISTORY OF

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AFRICAN
AMERICAN
LITERATURE

EDITED BY
MARYEMMA GRAHAM
AND JERRY W. WARD, JR.



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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The first major twenty-first-century history of four hundred years of black writing, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* presents a comprehensive overview of the literary traditions, oral and print, of African-descended peoples in the United States. Expert contributors, drawn from the United States and beyond, emphasize the dual nature of each text discussed as a work of art created by an individual and as a response to unfolding events in American cultural, political, and social history. Unprecedented in scope, sophistication, and accessibility, the volume draws together current scholarship in the field. It also looks ahead to suggest new approaches, new areas of study, and as yet undervalued writers and works. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a major achievement both as a work of reference and as a compelling narrative and will remain essential reading for scholars and students in years to come.

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MARYEMMA GRAHAM

and

JERRY W. WARD, JR.



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Introduction

MARYEMMA GRAHAM AND JERRY W. WARD

In the twenty-first century, literary histories may achieve a limited degree of comprehensiveness in dealing with a vast amount of literary and cultural data; the idea that they might be definitive is merely tantalizing. We are cautioned to remember, as Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon have suggested in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, that “the literary past” – that is, the past of both literature’s production and its reception – is unavoidably interpreted in the light of the present and that literary historians create meaning by ordering and shaping stories about texts and contexts; in short, “economic, political, and broader cultural and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the constructing of any literary history today in a different way than in the past.”¹ These premises about writing history assume great importance in a project that focuses on the continuing evolution of African American literature, because the subject is intimately related to such matters as the slave trade and the curious institution of slavery in the United States; the forced merger of African ethnic groups into an identity named African American; new forms of verbal expression which are the consequence of contact among Africans, indigenous peoples, and Europeans; struggles for emancipation and literacy; race as a social dynamic, and the changing ideologies that support the American democratic experiment. The writing of literary history, of course, must cross disciplinary boundaries, for it cannot otherwise provide nuanced reports on the indeterminacy of texts. The adequacy of the literary history is challenged by the recovery of forgotten or lost texts and the acquisition of new insights. Moreover, advances in cultural theory and criticism may necessitate continued modification and revision of the historical interpretation. Thus, literary history is always a work-in-progress. No matter how logical their arrangements of parts, their explanations of interconnections among forms, public events, and creative choices, and their configuration of tradition, literary historians conduct unfinished quests for order. Nowhere is this vexed search greater or more necessary than in the field of African American literature.

The Cambridge History of African American Literature (CHAAL) has a goal that may seem radical within the tradition of writing literary histories. Beyond presenting a fairly complete chronological description of African American literature in the United States, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, this reference work seeks to illustrate how the literature comprises orature (oral literature) and printed texts simultaneously. The reason is not far to seek. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. demonstrated in *The Signifying Monkey*, performance is one of the distinguishing features of African American literature. The role of utterance or speech is not necessarily secondary to the role of writing or inscription. Speaking and writing are interlocked frequencies of a single formal phenomenon.²

Increasingly, literary historians are beginning to recognize that writers are not the sole shapers of literature, that people who are not usually deemed citizens in the republic of letters must not be ignored in describing the interweavings of literature, imagination, and literacy. Thus, we must give attention to the roles of publishers, editors, academic critics, common readers, and mass media reviewers in shaping textual forms, literary reputations, and literary tastes. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a part of that emerging recognition.

We contend that a literary history of African American verbal expressions will make a stronger contribution to knowledge about literary production and reception if it exploits insights derived from Stephen Henderson's theorizing in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*³ and from Elizabeth McHenry's claim in *Forgotten Readers* that "to recover more fully the history of African American cultural production...we must be open to replacing our notion of a singular black literary tradition by attending to the many, diverse elements that form the groundwork of any tradition."⁴ Such replacement suggests the desirability of avoiding a strictly binary focus on literary production, e.g. opposing the folk level of production examined at length in Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*⁵ to a more public level of self-conscious imitation, creation, and consuming.⁶

Although the strongest syncretism of African and European modes is located in texts, the story we must tell is more complicated. We locate the origins of African American literature not in the United States but on the continent of Africa. Our construction of a history begins with the oral and written practices of diverse, mainly West African ethnic groups whose African identities were transformed in the process of the Middle Passage and in their subsequent dispersal in the Americas. Traumatic as this passage from life to death was, to borrow language from Robert Hayden's poem "Middle

Passage,” this moment of the slave trade did not exactly leave people bereft of memory or their culture. The view that the enslaved arrived in the United States as hopeless pagans and primitives is being slowly dislodged. “The native African,” as historian Michael Gomez puts the matter, “did not forget her own language, whether or not she ever learned or demonstrated that she had learned the English dialect.”⁷ Gomez argues convincingly that Africans in the Americas had to grapple with both interethnic change and linguistic creolization, processes that “moved along a continuum from ethnicity to race.”⁸ If a literary history begins with unquestioned assumptions about African cultural unity, it will perpetuate the unfortunate idea that literary tradition(s) emerged from the imaginations and adaptive strategies of a more or less unified race of people. Such a history overlooks the importance of exposing points of difference and points of sameness. The myth of unification is deconstructed by the data provided by eighteenth-century published texts in comparison with oral “texts” recovered during the nineteenth century. If the word “texts” is used in a liberal, postmodern sense proposed by Roland Barthes,⁹ it can be discerned that written texts and oral texts can both be presented as “published” material; knowing the provenance of an oral “text,” however, urges one to weigh carefully variations in the origins of African American texts. At the level of expressive origins the fiction of unity can be exposed.

The complex social, linguistic, and literary background of enslaved Africans persuades us to restore their humanity, to give more careful attention to the extent that Arabic/Islamic and indigenous forms of literacy informed traditions of poetry and narrative prior to the Atlantic slave trade. To be sure, we agree in part with the idea that the origins of African American literature, according to Dickson Bruce, involve “a process in which black and white writers collaborated in the creation of ... an ‘African American literary presence’ in the United States” and that “at the center of this process was the question of authority.”¹⁰ In conceptualizing this project, however, we privilege Africa and African American agency a bit more strongly. This choice intensifies inquiry about the dynamics of change and brings to the foreground a distinct, frequently conflicted, relationship that African American literature has with America’s literary traditions in the broadest sense. It also enables us to construct a narrative that accounts, as rigorously as possible, for continuing patterns of harmony and discord in collective creativity as well as in the creative expressions of individuals. We have also consciously rejected the categories “major” and “minor,” categories that serve to frustrate rather than clarify our general understanding of how literary traditions take multiple shapes over time.

For the purpose of writing literary history, we are indebted to Lucien Goldmann's assertion that the object of human sciences is "human actions of all times and places in the degree to which they have had or now have an importance for and an influence on the existence and structure of a human group."¹¹ What is being addressed is indeed the story of the existence and complex structure of African American literary acts and artifacts, and their continual evolving in the United States. Given that the magnitude of the project necessitates the writing of the narrative by various hands, we want this sense of literature as a human enterprise to increase the possibility of having minimal disruptions in the narrative flow. We ask questions, from the vantage point of a uniquely contextualized rootedness, about how Africans and their African American descendants use sounds and linguistic signs. We anticipate, of course, certain objections related to the issue of "language versus literature," particularly as the issue is manifested in our decision to deemphasize the exclusive definition of literature as possession of letters. We take instead literature to mean selected items of "verbal culture."

It must be emphasized that this history will privilege some concerns implicit in linguistics or in the larger field of communication, in particular the semantic and ideological dimensions of literature. The lines between literary studies and cultural studies are sufficiently indistinct to authorize the exploration of literary formations as cultural phenomena. Thus, our sense of a beginning can be represented by concise discussion of indigenous African language practices and their impact in tandem with European cultural contacts on the emergence of African American literature. Had Africans from various ethnic groups not come into contact by virtue of their removal from Africa and relocation to the far distant lands of the Americas, it seems unlikely that our currently recognizable deep structures of black literature, as these have been discussed in seminal works by such critics as Houston A. Baker, Trudier Harris, Aldon Nielsen, Hortense Spillers, and Henry Louis Gates, would have ever evolved. Locating the origins of literary thought in the specific conditions of internal and external African slave trading reorients scholarly study to the indivisibility of form and the motives for producing forms, matters central in the history of literary production and reception.

The history of African American literature we envision borders on what one might call cultural genetics (diachronic study of language, rhythm, and sound pertinent to literature), a principled effort to minimize a priori conceptions of what really happened in the unfolding of a people's literature and to sift through extant textual evidence to tell a story.

Twentieth-century scholarship in the field of African American literature gave substantial attention to individual authors, genres, and movements, and it incorporated varying degrees of literary history in explaining how writers, generic transformations, and moments of unusual artistic productivity (the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance, for example) have shaped a literary tradition. Such early studies as Vernon Loggins's *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (1931), Sterling Brown's companion books *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1938) and *The Negro in American Fiction* (1938), J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), and Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948) initiated historically focused discussions of literature. Based on materials gathered by Alain Locke, Margaret Just Butcher's *The Negro in American Culture* (1956) stressed what one might call the omni-American nature of African American culture, an issue that still must be negotiated in creating a comprehensive history of African American literature. For this history, we draw on a number of stellar studies of scholars, produced in the last thirty-plus years. John Lovell's *Black Song: The Force and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (1972) is a magisterial example of historical investigation of a genre. Eugene B. Redmond's *Drumvoices* (1976) provides comprehensive documentation of black poetry from 1746 to the 1970s. Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (1975), Bernard Bell's companion histories *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) and *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (2004), and J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* (1996) illustrate historiographic shifts in the study of a genre. Similarly, Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), William Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), Geta Leseur's *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (1995), and Roland Williams's *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom* (2000) emphasize the implications life writing may have for the development of other forms. These works and many others are preludes to the monumental tasks assumed by Blyden Jackson in *A History of Afro-American Literature*, vol. 1: *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895* (1989) and Dickson D. Bruce in *The Origins of African American Literature 1680–1865* (2001), namely, the creation of explanatory narratives of the first two centuries of the African American literary tradition. Prior to the publication of these works, scholars and students were obliged to develop a sense of African American literary history from various articles, books, bibliographies, and the introductory matter in anthologies of African American literature. Jackson and Bruce were arguably pioneers in attempting

comprehensive explorations of the historical conditions governing the African American literary enterprise, and their books served as useful guides for the construction of this volume.

This literary history establishes the validity of engaging a people's expressions over time by accounting for the simultaneity of aesthetic, political, spiritual, and religious dimensions in their works. It makes a case for what might be called liberated readings by orienting readers to the ways that African American writers, or creators if you will, have used principles of overdeterminacy in shaping situated responses, the emotive and intellectual traces of their being-in-the-world.

The Cambridge History of African American Literature reflects the intentions and preferences of the editors, these being an inevitable result of temporality, our cultural grounding, and scholarly trends. However much historical narratives are governed by "facts" about the subject, the selection and ordering of "facts" is influenced by varying degrees of subjectivity. The history is never totally objective. Ethical scholarship demands that readers be aware of the justifications that buttress the narrative choices, methodologies, and angles of interpretation present in the history. At this point in the history of scholarship, the weight given to theory in literary and cultural studies often does not encourage a balance between judging literary texts as documentary evidence and evaluating the formal features of those texts to expose their rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions. In short, it is possible to have a literary history that deemphasizes the Horatian ideals of delighting and instructing. We wished to avoid this embarrassment in the making of this volume, because we deem literature and literary transactions to be profoundly human activities.

We consider the text, whether from oral or print traditions, as necessary responses to the affairs and conditions that at any given time serve as catalysts for literary interpretations and discourses. This in no way reduces our concern with the language or languages of spoken (oral tradition) and written texts, what Gates has called our "speakerly" and "writerly" legacy.¹² Ultimately, it is use of language and multiple forms of literacy that give shape and substance to a literary tradition. It is Goldman who reminds us that this use of language is one element of a complex phenomenon he saw as "the object of historical sciences," just as McHenry urges us to change "our focus from...familiar to unfamiliar definitions of literacy."¹³

Aware that contemporary literary theory and criticism may inadvertently minimize the importance of human agency in literary discourse, we foreground the importance of human consciousness and will in the creation of

literature. Thus we highlight moral, political, and aesthetic concerns of texts with varying degrees of emphasis, fully aware of the extent to which these are often determined by specific critical schools and preferences. The object of this variation, of course, is to find a convincing balance between what we know about texts and the contexts from which they emerged. We will note as a cautionary matter that history, as opposed to criticism, demands sensitivity to how a given work might have provoked or otherwise engaged an audience in the past and to how the same work engages the modern mind. We are obligated to observe the distinction E.D. Hirsch made in *Validity in Interpretation* between “meaning”, which is provisionally static, and “significance”, which varies among interpreters. Such observation tempered our planning, although we were aware that Hirsch’s formulation must always be challenged by recognition that meaning and significance are not givens but constructions.¹⁴

The division of the volume into three parts is consistent with our intention to present a fairly complete chronological ordering of events and assess the developments and major trends in African American literature from its African origins to its print inception in the seventeenth century to the present. Each part is then organized into chapters with dates to serve as a general guide for the reader. We caution readers to remember that beginning and ending dates for these divisions are suggestive. They are not absolute. The conditions that impact various forms of cultural production affect writers, and writers expand and explode the very boundaries we may claim they define. It is to be expected, therefore, that our chapter authors will refer to and discuss writers and texts that might appear outside the timeline of their coverage, just as we consider it appropriate to allow a certain degree of overlap among the individual chapters.

The eleven chapters in Part 1 deal with the African American literary tradition from 1600 to 1910. We have chosen to begin with what Blyden Jackson considers the two-hundred-year germination period of African American literature, dating back to 1441 when the first Africans were captured by a Portuguese sea captain, thus initiating that lucrative and all-encompassing event the Atlantic slave trade, and redefining the entire Atlantic world.¹⁵ The subsequent peopling of North America by European settlers, the importation of African slaves, and the widespread practice of American slavery are primary factors to be considered when examining the meanings and materials constituting the earliest African American literature. It was indeed a “literature of Africans in America.” F. Abiola Irele’s opening chapter draws the reader’s

attention to what many critics have agreed is central to this literature as it was then and now: the element of *sound*, a black sound, as manifested through the languages of music and the voice. There are two main reasons why sound is given preeminence. First, Africans brought to the Americas were prohibited by law from being taught to read and write in English. For a longer time than most people living in a foreign land, therefore, African Americans were forced to create effective and elaborate systems for communicating based on sound and the instruments of sound, the voice, the body, and, for those who were fortunate, the drum. The second reason is that the newly arrived Africans spoke many languages that would become an interethnic language through a continuing process of creolization. This was a functional language needed to serve multiple roles, not the least of which was negotiating plantation life. Thus, the relationship between the spoken and the written and the values reinforced by the politics of dislocation, relocation, and identity as the basis for oral and print literatures, must be kept in mind.

Against this backdrop of conquest, colonization, and the acquisition of wealth and power, a series of public discourses and legal actions which authorized specific ideologies of race became absorbed into an emergent black literature between 1600 and 1800. Both print and oral, both Anglophone and colonial, it was created by African slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes, for whom the memories of Africa were essential to their psychic and social survival, as so many of the slave songs confirm. By offering this perspective as a way to understand the travel and exchanges initiated by the slave trade as one of the earliest forms of transnationalism, Philip Gould and Vincent Carretta in Chapters 2 and 3 confirm the centrality of African-derived people to the project of modernity, which is discussed at length in Part II. Just as Paul Gilroy has linked modernity to his concept of the Black Atlantic as a form of intellectual and geographic encounter,¹⁶ so too are we reminded that a sizeable body of writing by kidnapped African travelers to England, colonial America, and elsewhere planted the seeds of the contemporary Black Diaspora. It was this literature of movement, "geographical, ontological and rhetorical," as Gould convincingly argues, that began to demonstrate "complex negotiations of the language and ideas normally associated with Enlightenment ideology."

The years between 1820 and 1865 are as critical as they are ironic in the development of African American writing. If we consider the subject of slavery and the representation of black people in literature, then we could argue that at this juncture virtually all American literature is "black." Chapter 4 by Stefan Wheelock and Chapter 5 by John Ernest consider the

forty-five-year period from inside and outside the organized abolitionist movement in order to comprehend the broad range of activities that produced antislavery literature. Wheelock pays special attention to a literature of self-empowerment, resistance, and spiritual reform, created by those who imagined new possibilities for women in religious authority, a development that did not take place without struggle. By looking at the geographical distribution of the African American population in the United States in midcentury, the coexistence of different language traditions, and the literature of both enslaved and free people, we can gain a fuller appreciation of the richness and diversity of pre-Civil War literature, while emphasizing the larger question of literacy and the growth of print culture in America. Chapter 6 by Kimberly Blockett and Chapter 7 by Joycelyn Moody concentrate on the purposes of writing and reading, especially when the ideas of freedom and independence are being interrogated. They point to some new directions that challenge conventional notions of literary and cultural production, distribution, and audience in some of the most crucial decades of the nineteenth century. From militant activism and radical abolition to expressions of national, cultural, and linguistic identity, African American literature began to consolidate a complex racial and cultural identity well before Emancipation. If there is a central theme in this literature, it is a concern with resisting the monolithic and generally negative view of African Americans, encouraged, however inadvertently, by the focus on slavery. What all the literature shares, whether antislavery or pro-black, is a belief in the freedom to speak for oneself. In an effort to reflect this diversity, Blockett explores literature written by free blacks North and South, while Moody examines the origins and impact of the black press.

The fight against slavery necessitated a propagandistic mode of writing committed to education and information about “the peculiar institution” as it agitated for the end of slavery. Postbellum America frames an era commonly understood as the “dawn of freedom,” the years between 1865 and 1910, which presented new conditions for forging an entirely new literature of necessity. It is not surprising that during Reconstruction (1865–77) the contradiction between the possibility of a fully realized freedom and the threat of new forms of oppression and discrimination fueled enormous debates. African American literature after the Civil War begins to shift its racial discourse in order to (1) promote racial and moral uplift, social progress, and solidarity; (2) gain an identifiable, if not authoritative presence in mainstream America; and (3) exercise greater control over the representation of self. In part, this is a function of the way African American literature

confronted late nineteenth-century sensibilities, including the “cult of true womanhood,” the sentimental novel, and diminishing national interest in the plight of black people.

As Warren J. Carson points out in Chapter 8, despite the end of Reconstruction and entrenchment of segregation, the rapid growth of public and church-supported educational institutions, advances in print technology, and an earnest desire to overcome the obstacles of economic oppression gave substance and energy to a multifaceted enterprise that African Americans took to mean freedom. The institutional and organizational life of blacks took highly visible forms and created important roles for women in churches, businesses, and self-help societies. This, in turn, inspired autobiographies, biographies, and anthologies of achievement, and fiction focusing on domesticity, racial violence, and empowerment. These forms of writing were profoundly impacted by the changes in demography, the increase in literacy, the activities of women’s and literary clubs, and the revitalization of an independent black press, which, as Donald Joyce points out, was at an all time high.¹⁷ While large numbers of African Americans remained on farms, a significant number migrated to the North, Midwest, and West. Migrations of African American people created greater opportunities for them to be influenced by a wider range of cross-cultural dynamics and traditions than was possible during slavery. In this regard, black literature, like dance and music, symbolized and represented ideas and emotions that were themselves in flux, the idea that prompted Farah Jasmine Griffin’s investigation into the development of an “African American migration narrative,” giving the provocative title of her resulting work as *Who Set You Flowin’?* (1995). In order to give sufficient attention to the key generic developments in the critical years before the New Negro Renaissance, this section includes Chapter 9, Keith Byerman and Hanna Wallinger’s discussions of fiction by both men and women, and reconsiderations of poetry in Chapter 10 by Keith Leonard and Chapter 11 by Mark A. Sanders. These chapters allow for more focused and parallel discussions of African American poetry and fiction.

The beginning years of the twentieth century provide a point of origin for Part II. Changing conditions of African American life and new structures of authority governing ideas, action, and expression contributed to a collective declaration of identity and social cohesion, which we define as a specific African American modernism, an organizing theme for Part II. The twelve chapters deal with what might be considered “geographies of the modern” for the years from 1910 to 1950. For the period between 1950 and 1976, chapters treat the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic phenomena era as critical historical markers; the final set of chapters look more

closely at the narrative and poetic transformations that took place in the years after 1976.

Considerable scholarship already exists on the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance, a period usually limited to the decade of the 1920s. However, the imperatives driving the Renaissance, delineated in Craig H. Werner and Sandra G. Shannon's Chapter 12, serve as the basis for our extending the Renaissance period to the 1950s. These imperatives came from the growing acceptance of the literary representations of blacks by blacks and were facilitated by the commercialization and commodification of African American expressive culture, all of which made for new aesthetic possibilities. Emily Bernard follows in Chapter 13 with a consideration of "The New Negro Movement and the politics of art." Equally important, however, is the period between 1920 and 1950, defined by two major wars, a depression, the transformation of black people from rural to urban, immigrations, and the rise of a Cold War sensibility. Therefore, in Chapters 14 and 15, Darryl Dickson-Carr and Nicole Waligora-Davis describe the shift toward social realism in literary expression, one that, while different from the New Negro Renaissance in style and emphasis, demonstrates a continued and highly influential period of literary productivity, which manifested itself in a Chicago Renaissance and also became far more global following the Great Depression.

Chapter 16 by John Lowe sets the tone for the discussion of the Civil Rights era in African American literature by exploring the post-Second World War fashioning of the American story. While the radical innovation in artistic expression and a certain occupation with the exchanges between America and Europe have shaped our notion of a Renaissance, we follow the lead established by Houston Baker, Craig Werner, George Hutchinson, and others by looking at an interior domestic context to better understand the dynamics of African American literary culture. This emphasis, however, does not deny the importance of continuing interaction of ideas and expressions between and among the multilingual population of black people living in the United States and throughout the African Diaspora, interactions to which Sabine Broeck and Daryl Cumber Dance give attention in Chapters 17 and 18.

Many have considered the decade of the 1950s a golden age in African American literature. It began as Gwendolyn Brooks won a Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950, only to be followed by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The criticism on Ellison and Hansberry alone suggests that African American literature by the late fifties not only had found an audience, but also had declared itself a rhetorical battleground, capable of generating ideas, metaphors, and myths that were

undeniably American. While this is the shortest period in our historical narrative, it evokes both the most important and the most radical changes that help account for the complex sensibility that would govern subsequent black literary practice. With increased educational and social opportunities, a new generation of writers emerged whose careers would take full shape after 1970, all intent on rethinking the conceptual boundaries for African American literature and the literary imagination. In addition to Ellison, Brooks, and Hansberry, the period saw the emergence of James Baldwin, Paule Marshall, and, as the decade drew to a close, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) among others. In general, African American writing drew its strength from an ability to master the themes and conventions of traditional American writing, while simultaneously engaging in a new “literary archaeology,” as Toni Morrison suggests.¹⁸ We view the 1950s as the beginning of a sustained period of highly influential black writing and its preeminence in American culture. Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, John A. Williams, and Leon Forrest, who were college age in the 1950s, were among the first generation of black writers to come of age reading other black writers whom the broader society would soon acknowledge as extraordinary.

This portion of *CHAAL*, therefore, offers a close examination of two decades with epoch-changing events and occurrences: the Civil Rights Movement and the dismantling of legal segregation, the Black Power Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Feminist Movement. The contradictory nature of the period is indicated by the lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi and race riots in Newark, Detroit, and Chicago on the one hand. On the other there were sweeping changes in the body politic as a result of well-funded federal and private programs to advance social justice and promote equality, especially those in higher education that resulted in the institutionalization of Black Studies. Determining the relationship between the literary works and the period thus requires paying careful attention to the way in which African American literature engaged these contradictory cultural forces. It is not insignificant that the two decades seemed to be diametrically opposed to one another: the fifties bringing about the hopefulness of integration within the USA, the sixties calling for the death of US capitalism. Whatever ideological orientation one takes, until then, little attention had been given to solving the nation’s most pressing social and economic problems. Following the assassinations and deaths of a host of leaders, both known and unknown – John Kennedy, Medgar Evers (Mississippi NAACP leader), Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – riots erupted in the nation’s cities confirming the magnitude of unaddressed problems.

The shift in the political and ideological winds is reflected in the phrase “black art is black life” and the call for a new literature, revolutionary in content and form, the subject of the final chapter in this grouping. This new black literature is governed by a Black Aesthetic that James E. Smethurst and Howard Ramsby II explore at length in Chapter 19. Expressing the rage and intensity of the period, the Black Aesthetic defined itself as a new spiritual and political force, indeed a Black Arts Movement (BAM). It found its base among a grassroots, working-class population, most of whom had seen little if any change in their own social circumstances. Oppositional by definition, BAM found its parallel in an assortment of institutional formations, the most important of which was the rise of Black Studies, and the wide-scale educational reforms that were not always willingly embraced by the academy. BAM and the radical rupture that African American artists made with the past gave new meaning to racial and historical narratives.

By investigating these literary developments in the twentieth century in view of recent theories about race, gender, and cultural politics, the chapters in Part II defer acts of judgment that would emphasize the failure or successes of a given movement. Instead, these chapters enable our looking more closely at ways in which African American writing was advanced through radical and conservative agendas that added complex layerings and histories for writers to uncover. Just as we considered New York and Chicago as literary case studies for the 1920s and 1930s, we consider multiple centers of production as well as various platforms during the 1960s and 1970s. This strategy permits the juxtaposition of leading authors with lesser-known writers and less-discussed genres, such as theater. But it also allows Trudier Harris in Chapter 20 to examine what is involved when writers turn the facts of history into fiction. This turn to history and the historical in search of “sites of memory,” the term popularized by Pierre Nora,¹⁹ is especially noticeable in works that followed Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966). The folk novel of slavery and reconstruction demonstrated the rich literary potential in that very subject matter that most had wanted to forget. Likewise, in Chapters 21 and 22 Opal J. Moore and Tony Bolden look at these developments as they took shape in black poetry, without dismissing the role and importance of the earlier Black Arts Movement, which perhaps contributed to rather than detracted from – as some have argued – greater mainstream visibility for many poets. Retaining the focus on genre in these chapters leads to greater insights about the cross-fertilization between and among forms of written and oral expression. Mapping the growth and development of black literary production becomes central to each of these chapters which consider the twentieth century from a chronological

perspective. Rather than a finite sense of beginnings and endings of movements, the intention is to foster a deeper understanding of the continuities, appropriate breaks, disruptions, and false starts and to help recover a sense of balance between internal and external factors that directly or indirectly shaped literary ideas and practices at a given moment, for a particular group of writers in one or more geographical locations.

If there is a year that is most significant for the history of contemporary African American literary production, it is 1970. It was in that year that Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Louise Meriweather, Alice Walker, Toni Cade [Bambara], Mari Evans, Michael Harper, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou each published a major work; Charles Gordone won the Pulitzer Prize for his provocative play *No Place To Be Somebody*. This decided shift leads us to consider some of the reasons for the increased demand for and reception of black literature. In terms of content, scholars are generally agreed that African American literature in the last three decades of the twentieth century was marked by a reinvestment in storytelling and orality. African American literature redefined the meaning and function of art as an aesthetic and social force, and, especially since the 1980s, has placed a greater importance upon performance-based modes of expression. Writers confronted race, directly, obliquely, or not at all, and they examined or reexamined issues of class, gender, sexuality, and intragroup relations to a far greater extent than ever before. This body of literature, as Madhu Dubey and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg discuss it in Chapter 23, has produced a rich array of forms that utilize the dramatic, lyric, and narrative modes in new ways and draw their fundamental strength and energy from the social/political context of various cultural origins. This concluding chapter in Part II confirms the existence of an African American literature that continues to push beyond national and aesthetic boundaries, even as it moves inward, passionately and expertly reclaiming the past. Thus, we are especially concerned in Part II with how texts “rediscovered” now reshape views of their past “significance.”

Part III, while still historical, is a reminder that this volume serves as a corrective to conventional literary histories by addressing the apparent contradiction between culture and capital. Appropriately called “African American literature as academic and cultural capital,” its five chapters reflect upon the operations of literature in the marketplace and forms of scholarly practice. At a time when modern technologies enable works to reach untold numbers of American and international audiences, we can get the illusion that literature addresses a unified community of audiences in sexual, gender, or class terms. The truth is that the market is more segmented than it ever has been.

Moreover, at least one consequence of this expanded marketability of black texts is the creation of false boundaries between modes – the literary and the popular, for example – too often used to determine what is worthy of critical attention and what is not. Just as modern technology makes possible the interface between words, sound, and rhythm creating new “texts,” the interface between new readers and black literature has redefined the role and importance of reading and writing in a postmodern age. While this is a topic for a book-length discussion in its own right, it must be noted here that those very works considered insufficiently “literary” have created a large base of readers and writers and represent a sizeable component of African American literary production. More importantly, both children’s literature, as examined by Giselle Liza Anatol in Chapter 24, and popular fiction, examined here by Candice Love Jackson in Chapter 25, pose questions to readers and viewers about race, power, and social change in innovative and effective ways that have generated lively discussions about textual, ideological, and aesthetic concerns. A second important area is African American theater, which has made significant strides in building new audiences, especially with the record performances of playwrights such as August Wilson, three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. The stage as a site for engaging matters of history and culture opens up numerous possibilities unavailable before, according to Harry J. Elam in Chapter 26. To this extent, while we must view literary production as being driven by market forces that define both the audience and the form, it also adds range and complexity that changes the terms of literary discourse altogether. These popular fictions, as Jackson argues, must therefore be seen on a continuum that includes the textual play of Toni Morrison’s fiction as well as other kinds of texts (such as romance novels) that meet specific cultural and ideological needs of dedicated audiences. Because this is a very complex area for scholarship with countless volumes published since the 1970s, Chapter 25 does not offer detailed discussion of the works. It does, however, cover representative authors, outlining the historical and political developments shaping this unique period in African American literary history.

With regard to the history of scholarly practice, Chapter 27 by Lawrence P. Jackson is devoted to the rise of theory and criticism before the epistemic ruptures of the 1960s. Looking at what came before allows us to consider the relationship between established literary discourses and paradigms. Tracing the work of black scholars from the 1940s to the 1960s, who worked primarily in “separate spheres” and were for the most part excluded from the mainstream dialogues, highlights the conditions leading up to and surrounding radical shifts after the publication of *Black Fire* (1968) and *Afro-American*

Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction (1979). The displacement of traditional, hegemonic critical paradigms in works by Addison Gayle, Jr., Stephen E. Henderson, Lorenzo Thomas, and other Black Aesthetic theorists was itself overturned by what might be named critical reconciliation with structuralism, postmodernism, the new historicism, and deconstruction. Finally, Kenneth W. Warren's Chapter 28 points us to forms of things unknown about a future for African American literature in the twenty-first century.

In its totality, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* bids readers to ponder their own roles in the construction and reconstruction of a literary history, and whether, as Kenneth W. Warren proposes by way of tentative conclusion, "the [presumed] end of racial inequality will also portend the end of any significant cultural work for African American literature." We are obliged, of course, to withhold judgment on the matter until other literary histories are written in the problematic nowness of the twenty-first century.

Like anthologies, contemporary literary histories are compilations of parts rather than seamless expositions. They always leave some portion of the story untold. Written by independent, transnational thinkers who are not of one accord regarding the dialogic, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of ethnicity-bound narratives, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* contains omissions. For some perspectives they deem essential, readers will have to consult specialized articles and books. It is the function of the CHAAL bibliography and suggested further readings to direct them to those resources. Attention to forms of black writing that have special efferent and aesthetic properties – namely, letters, personal and political essays, biographies, "pure" and collaborative autobiographies, film as literature, the graphic narratives of an Aaron McGruder, and contemporary orature – is either diffuse or invisible.

The most obvious omission is sustained commentary on such "canonized" and "uncanonized" writers as Alice Childress, John Oliver Killens, Toni Cade Bambara, Alvin Aubert, Maya Angelou, Kalamu ya Salaam, Arthenia Bates Millican, Toi Derricotte, and others, all of whom ought to be acknowledged as participants in the evolution of African American literature. The absence will very likely evoke partisan execration, and the signifying must be confronted with audacious forthrightness. Truth be told, considerations about word count, literary historical subjectivity, instances of editorial amnesia in accounting for three centuries of literature, and the mission impossible of herding cats are all to blame. We are cognizant of gaps, the want of full disclosure. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a necessary but not a definitive one, because a definitive literary history remains a post-future project.

Introduction

Notes

1. Mario J. Valdez and Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. ix–x.
2. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 170–261.
3. Stephen E. Henderson (ed.), *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).
4. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 6–7.
5. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
6. See Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
7. Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 174–175.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
9. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in Vincent B. Leitch et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 1470–1475.
10. Dickson Bruce, *The Origins of African American Literature 1680–1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. ix.
11. Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 2.
12. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. xxv–xxviii.
13. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, p. 14.
14. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 8.
15. Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature*, vol. 1: *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 1.
16. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
17. Donald Joyce, *Gatekeepers of Black Culture: Black Owned Book Publishers in the US 1817–1981* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).
18. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 183–199; p. 112.
19. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (eds.), *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 284–300.

PART I

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AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Sounds of a tradition: the souls of black folk

F. ABIOLA IRELE

Although many African societies developed elaborate indigenous writing systems, some of which are still in active use today – as is the case, notably, with Amharic in Ethiopia – the expressive culture of the continent has been more closely associated with the phenomenon of orality. The complex linguistic situation in which over a thousand distinct languages are spoken in Africa, each with several dialects, has meant that the communicative process has been and continues to be carried out on the continent predominantly through the oral mode.¹ This situation in itself calls attention to the universal fact that orality is the primary basis of all natural language, a given truth of nature that has determined the evolution of modern linguistics, so that writing, as a graphic representation, has come to be considered a secondary mode of language. It is of interest in this regard to note the reservations expressed by Plato in his *Cratylus*, with regard to what seemed to him the inauthentic nature of writing, dependent as it is on a technology for the transmission of thought, as against the immediacy of oral speech.² This reservation seems to have been shared by St. Augustine, who remarks on the contrast between the fixed spatiality of writing, as opposed to the natural unfolding of oral speech in time.³

It is in the perspective of the dominant role of orality in all aspects of linguistic behavior in African life and cultural expression that we need to consider its relation to those forms of the creative deployment of language that we associate with literature as a phenomenon. This observation raises two issues in any consideration of African oral literature: first, as a major component of the cultural capital of African societies, and secondly, as a primary foundation for the black imagination in the New World.

The first issue has to do with what we might call the epistemological status of African oral literature, the recognition of this literature as constituting a distinct category of the imaginative function. This relates to a general question

of definition and methodology that is entailed by the imperatives of literary analysis and critical discourse in the Western academy, but is also inherent in the prevailing attitudes toward orality that have been promoted by the privileging of the written mode in Western culture. Here, we have to contend with the difficulty for those raised in a literate culture of conceiving of orality as capable of sustaining any form of extended discourse, and especially of deliberately structured utterances that derive coherence from an imaginative and aesthetic project. We encounter here the same problem as in other areas of African artistic creation, in music for example, where the absence of notation has led Western observers to ignore the intrinsic quality of African musical expression. This limited view has induced Jack Goody to write: "One cannot imagine a novel or a symphony in a society without writing, even though one finds narrative and orchestra."⁴ Goody's point seems to concern the degree of elaboration of the form in question, but experience has shown that notation is not a necessary condition for complexity in musical performance. Indeed, Leroy Vail and Landeg White, who quote Goody's comment, have offered a rebuttal by pointing to the elaborate symphonic form of the *ngondo*, a recognized musical genre among the Chopi of Zambia.⁵ It is as if, for Goody and scholars of his persuasion, the essence of the artistic phenomenon resides in the material text by which it is represented, rather than in its formal manifestation as actualized in performance.

It is on this basis of such misconceptions that objections have often been voiced concerning the use of the term "literature" to designate oral forms of imaginative expression, on the grounds that the word derives from the Latin *litera* which has to do essentially with writing. While it is true that the term has been employed in this sense to cover all forms of scriptural representations of language – as when we speak for instance of "the literature of science" – the word "literature" has come more lately, at least since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (the romantic age in other words), to assume a more restrictive sense and thus to refer to works that derive their form and essence from the exercise of the imaginative faculty.⁶ It is this understanding of oral expression as bearing a relation to the imagination that informs Lawrence Buell's definition of literature when he writes: "Literature in my notion of it comprises potentially all written and oral utterances, insofar as anything made out of words can be treated as a literary artifact." It is, however, important to draw attention to the rider that qualifies his definition: "although I would characterize individual utterances as literary in proportion to their capacity to provoke responses to them as verbal constructs, above and beyond their perceived function as means of communication."⁷

The broad definition offered by Buell and the qualification he adds address one of the central questions with which the Russian formalists were concerned, which had to do with the nature of literature in itself, as it were (*an sich*), involving the idea of “literarity” (*littérarité*, in the French) as a special quality of language in what might be called its expressive dimension, as distinct from its purely communicative function. Tzvetan Todorov has more lately returned to this question of “literarity” when he asks: “What is the difference between the literary and non-literary use of language?” He answers the question by invoking the two criteria of function and structure, but ends up with a statement that reflects, as nothing else, the postmodern inclination for paradox: “Attempting to define literature, the theoretician defines instead a logically superior notion, the ‘genus proximum.’ ... What the theoreticians have failed to do, however, is to indicate the ‘specific difference’ which characterizes literature within the ‘genus proximum.’ Could it be that no such difference is in any way perceptible? In other words, that literature does not exist?”⁸

The problem of definition cannot, however, be evaded in such a summary fashion, for we are constantly confronted with levels and modes of language use that take us beyond the purely communicative function, in which language serves to designate the world in its objective manifestations and to indicate events within that world, leading us to deeper realms of experience that are opened up for our contemplation by the complex resources of language itself. It is of special interest to observe that the question posed by Todorov presents itself in an arresting way in an oral culture in which, as Whiteley points out, the fluid continuity between all forms of speech acts obscures the passage from the purely communicative uses of language to the literary, a passage that is distinctly marked in a literate culture by a body of works that are identified, in their physical embodiment, as pertaining specifically to the imaginative realm.⁹ However, despite what seems an unbroken continuity between the communicative and the expressive uses of language in an oral culture, a fundamental distinction clearly obtains between what we may regard as the two outer boundaries of language, represented at one extreme by its denotative aspect, and at the other by the connotative, in this case a quality that is registered by unusual turns of speech that depart from normal usage related to everyday experience. This distinction between denotation and connotation, well known in elementary logic, is stressed by Jakobson in what he calls the “poetic use of language”¹⁰ and forms the basis for the notion of “foregrounding” (other terms are “estrangement,” “defamiliarization”) advanced by the Russian formalists in their effect upon language

in its expressive dimension. It is this notion that Richard Rorty has summarized when he writes: "Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in familiar ways."¹¹

The point, then, is that connotation introduces into language a complementary level of reference, by which language itself assumes a valency, a power of suggestion which enables it not merely to designate external reality, but also to engage the sensibility and thus to promote an enhanced consciousness of the world. In other words, the connotative aspect of language causes it to be newly circumscribed, as it were, in such a way that it becomes freighted with multiple meanings and thus comes in its social dimension to convey shared values and beliefs. To take a simple example, the locution "my father has joined the ancestors" will immediately be interpreted in many African societies to mean "my father has died," but the formulation assumes a special reference for members of the society that has to do with the structure of belief within their common culture. It is thus with good reason that Georges Mounin has observed that connotation is the essence of culture.¹² These preliminary remarks indicate that the bending of language to expressive needs operates equally within oral as within written literatures; in other words, the same criteria of "literarity" apply to both the oral and the written mode. The essential consideration here has to do with the intrinsic formal qualities of the mode of expression and the structural means by which these are obtained, rather than with the extrinsic and incidental circumstances of their production, as suggested in *The Truest Poetry* by Laurence Lerner who, in a throwback to the romantic image of the poet, identifies literature with the individual voice and vision.¹³ We might stress in this regard that the notion of literature as individual creation is limiting in the African context, in which, as we shall see, the communal input is an important component of the creative endeavor.

The emphasis on the formal criterion for determining literary value in language opens the way to a recognition of those factors which enable us to establish the broad perspectives for considering the interaction between form and function in African oral literature. At least three factors need to be attended to here. The first is fundamental: the literary quality of an utterance, whether oral or written, derives in the first instance from the recourse to metaphor, which serves to embroider language as it were, in order to emphasize its evocative and emotive potential. We might illustrate this point by noting the different semantic values assumed by the linguistic term "tree" and its concept, first in its literal meaning as encountered in botany, for

example, and the figurative use of the same term in other contexts in which it acquires an additional charge of meaning and reference, as in the proverbial saying “A tree doesn’t make a forest.” The significance of the same term can be further extended when it occurs as an image in an expression such as “The Tree of Life,” in which a wealth of connotation accrues to the term in its allusion to the Christian cross. The symbolic value of the term is intensified further when we go beyond the Christian allusion to the messianic import of the tree, in what may be termed the universal imaginary.¹⁴ We might observe that these differentiated instances of the term point to an ascending order of literarity in oral culture, one in which the connotative use of language admits of varying and increasing levels of signification and resonance.¹⁵

This observation leads to the second criterion, where form or structure emerges as even more determinant for the expressive function and literary quality of creative uses of language. This has to do with the calculated patterning of language in order to obtain an artistic effect, evident in the prosodic features – such as meter and rime – of certain forms that are recognizably part of the literary culture. These features compose what Jakobson has called “verse design,” but the structuring effect is not confined to verse, but can also be felt in prose, where the rhetorical effect of speech forms is obtained through the rhythmic pattern that marks the “periods” of enunciation. In addition to these features which are graphically represented in written literature, other features inherent to the oral mode attain their full scope only within the context of their actualization within performance. In an oral culture, what can be isolated as text, that is, as the verbal content in an extended utterance that aspires to the quality of literature, is so closely bound up with other artistic modes in the context of performance that it can be considered as only an element of the total artwork, an essential and central one as observed above, but existing in a necessary relation to other elements of the total performance. Thus, the narrative strategies of even the simple folk tale always involve the incorporation of songs led by the storyteller, accompanied by refrains from the audience, both forming an antiphonal pattern – the “call and response” pattern that has endured in African American performance styles. The point here is that direct appeal to music and dance constitutes an invariable element of the structure of the African folk tale in the realization of its dramatic potential.¹⁶

The example demonstrates the primacy of performance in oral literature, the way in which the vocal aspect is determinant as much for the formal properties of the spoken text as for the atmosphere and quality of performance. Thus, devices such as apostrophe and hyperbole, parallelism,

enumeration, repetition and anaphora or iteration generally, and collocations, are reinforced in the oral mode by sound values such as ideophones, onomatopoeia, tonal balance, and effects which are sustained in oral delivery by modulations of the voice. Moreover, the verbal/vocal aspect is conditioned by the personality of the poet and the dynamic context of the poetic recital, within which the visual impact created by props and costumes enhance the dramatic impact of delivery. It is in these ways that setting and audience participation come to count as active elements of the total aesthetic experience. They form part of a total process to which the deployment of an intense register of language – what, in his study of that title, Cohen refers to as *le haut langage* (“high language”) – is both instrumental and central.¹⁷

Apart from the two formal/structural aspects of oral literature evoked above, a third element, no less important, comes into play in its recognition as a privileged realm of expression. This has to do with the institutionalization of literature in oral cultures, no less marked than in literate cultures. Not only is a reverence for language as an active force a well-attested feature of social and religious experience in African traditional society,¹⁸ the verbal forms of heightened expression are often set apart, “reified” as it were, as a distinctive area of linguistic convention in the society. In other words, the expressive and aesthetic values embodied in the verbal arts constitute a significant component of the cultural references of oral societies. The social status and cultural significance of these literary forms has caused Paul Zumthor to refer to them as “monuments.”¹⁹

The practical consequence of this can be observed in the “professionalization” of the literary phenomenon, to which the function, status, and role of the oral bards in the indigenous cultures of Africa were central and remain today indispensable. The singularity of oral artists emerges in this perspective: the *griot* or *dyali* in the Manding-speaking areas of West Africa and the Zulu *imbongi* in South Africa emerge as the guardians of the textual values consecrated by the culture which they preserve primarily through the assiduous exercise of memory.²⁰ It is important to stress, however, that although an exceptional development of the powers of memory, as a physical endowment, constitutes a basic requirement for their role, they combine this prowess with individual creative and performance skills which form an essential part of their artistic vocation. As Albert Lord has pointed out, the role of the oral bard goes beyond passive reproduction and recital of texts, but also implies an active process of composition, even in the course of performance.²¹

Literature as a social institution in an oral culture can thus be seen to be governed by the same protocols as in a literate one – protocols that stipulate,

even in the absence of writing, the conditions of composition, transmission, and performance, upon which depends the process for the training of younger artists through apprenticeship. As a Sotho poet has put it, "poets beget poets."²² We are led further to consider the determining role of a circle of patronage, and its implications for the control of the discursive content and circulation of these forms, a point to which Michel Foucault has devoted sustained attention in the specific context of Western culture in his inaugural lecture, *L'Ordre du discours*.²³ In oral society, the exercise of control on discourse applies most clearly to forms considered sacred, their esoteric character often determining their hermetic forms of expression, as in the case of the Ifa corpus, the Yoruba divination poems.

When we turn to the study of specific forms, we are confronted at once with the problem of classification. To start with, the conventional poetry/prose dichotomy needs to be modified if not indeed set aside, at least provisionally. In an oral culture, in which the linguistic gesture that underlies the literary phenomenon involves performance without recourse to writing, the conception of poetry that prevails in the West as essentially verse set out in lines is not relevant to an appreciation of the literary status and quality of texts marked by an imaginative or contemplative character. The case of the Psalms in the Old Testament, in which the poetic progression is governed by breath stops, provides an illustration of this essential character of oral literature. As is well known, this has created the problem of lineation in transcriptions of oral poetry, a problem addressed by Olatunji in the case of Yoruba.²⁴ The point then is that the conventional boundaries between genres determined by the material disposition of the text, as established over time in written literature, cannot always be mapped in a direct way onto oral forms. In other words, by virtue of its manifestation in performance, oral literature can be considered essentially *multigeneric*. Because of this peculiarity, accepted terms in Western convention are not easily applicable to African oral forms. This is the source of the controversy as to whether African oral tradition developed "drama" or "epic" in the same sense as Western literature, a controversy that has proved ultimately pointless, since the generic classifications for African oral forms and Western literate ones, even when they are not identical, are not incommensurable, for equivalents can almost always be established between them.

We can go further to state that literary genres can be categorized in broad terms across cultures. Taking a general view, the first and most convenient approach is to distinguish between narrative forms on the one hand and the lyrical on the other, and, within these categories, to distinguish major forms from the minor ones. Often, in Africa, the classification will be determined as

much by context of performance as by level of enunciation and degree of elaboration. We might remark in this connection that, in the vast volume of research on African orality, it is not always recognized that the folk tale and moral fable are in fact minor forms that do not necessarily receive the same veneration as other genres such as the initiation myths, for example, which project a higher order of reality as registered in the belief system that underlies their elaboration in African traditional society. These myths constitute a major category that includes the great epics, the praise poems, and devotional texts.

It is not the case, moreover, that we have to fall back on approximations, for we can refer to the specific classifications established by the culture and the terminologies that exist in the various African languages in order to arrive at greater precision. The example of the oral literature of the Yoruba of south-west Nigeria will help to clarify the point. Here, several genres of both the narrative and the lyrical variety are explicitly recognized and designated. The term *itan* refers to all forms of narrative, embracing both fiction and history, the latter considered as an account of events that are held to have actually occurred, even when such accounts appear to the modern mind as legend and myth. The term reserved for poetic performance, *ewi*, conveys a sense of the spoken word as the founding principle of the imaginative and creative impulse, and is both generic – insofar as it relates to form – and also context bound, where it encompasses subdivisions such as *oriki* (praise poetry), *ofo* (chant), *ifa* (divination poetry), and *rara*, chanted by itinerant performers, and whose subject matter pertains to general observations about human life and experience. As Olatunji points out, these terms are closely associated with content and chanting mode.²⁵ An important point that emerges from the review above is that literary forms are identified in the African traditional societies by form and structure as well as by function.

The term “function” needs to be interpreted here in the sense of the affective charge of language where the audience is concerned, extending to the broader social implications of the literature, especially its prescribed outcomes as a force within the social dynamics of an oral culture. It is important to stress that this interpretation departs from the sense in which, collapsing content into form, Vladimir Propp employs the term to designate a sequence of distinctive episodes that serve as formal stages or nodal points in the construction of the narrative action in the folk tale.²⁶

The notion of function in its affective and social reference does not by any means preclude an aesthetic dimension. Contrary to the widespread opinion that there exists a necessary antithesis of the two, much world art has combined a utilitarian objective with an artistic design, like the Greek

amphora, for example. The parallel with the art of African pottery verifies this observation in a striking way, for contrary to the assertion by Kwame Appiah, who denies an artistic intent and aesthetic dimension to African art objects,²⁷ we encounter an effort to endow objects of everyday use with an aesthetic appeal and function that go beyond their purely utilitarian purpose.

Functionality in oral literature arises from the very fact that we are dealing with speech acts that are intentional, directed as a consequence toward eliciting a form of response. An oral culture is typically associated with face-to-face situations which facilitate an immediate rapport between social actors; the necessity of communication becomes the very condition of the existence and elaboration at any level of literary form in such a culture.

It is against this background that the notion of function takes on meaning in the appraisal of oral literature. In the African case with which we are concerned, at least six functions can be identified. The first and most evident is the *phatic* function, an essential aspect of what J. L. Austin referred to as the "illocutionary" mode of language²⁸ and which Bronislaw Malinowski expanded upon in his discussion of language as a form of social behaviour, in what he calls "phatic communion" in so-called primitive societies.²⁹

The phatic aspect of language is well demonstrated by greetings. In an expression such as "Good morning," language is employed not really in its referential function but rather as a means of establishing a connection with an interlocutor. The humble greeting can thus be considered an important binding element of social intercourse. This explains the highly developed form that greetings often assume in everyday life in oral societies, in which they may even be ritualized and conveyed by formulae in certain circumstances such as public functions and gatherings, as an essential component of the rhetoric of public discourse. It is no speculation to remark that the observed propensity of African Americans to such forms of address, with their phatic quality so well demonstrated by the interaction between ministers and congregations and the general atmosphere that prevails at sermons in the black church, derives from an ancestral retention rooted in an oral culture.

Along with the phatic function, and inherent in the participatory nature of oral literature, a second function, the *ludic*, offers a means of sensory gratification. Here, oral literature enacts in palpable form, as it were, what Huizinga called "the play element" in all cultures,³⁰ energized in the African context by the collective setting and appeal of the forms in question. The universal significance that Huizinga attributes to play is thus set in special relief by the celebratory character that oral performances always assume as a function of this collective involvement.

The two functions identified above serve as a precondition for what must be recognized as the third and primary function of oral literature, as indeed of all literature: that is, the *aesthetic*. Beyond the psychological aspect of the phatic function, and the sensory aspect of the ludic, imaginative expression provides a channel to a unique experience of language, one in which language itself comes to be regarded as *artifact*, as object of aesthetic contemplation. Thus, the aesthetic function reveals the objective nature of language, felt as an entity and therefore capable of being worked upon, molded, manipulated for effect. This perception of language and the aesthetic function associated with it is well summed up in the Igbo meta-proverb: "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten," a proverb that Chinua Achebe cites to great effect in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. But whereas in written literature the aesthetic function of language relies on the individual response of the reader taken in isolation, in the oral context the pleasure of words is a public good, evoking a collective investment in an aesthetic event.

Incidental to the aesthetic dimension of language when it is deployed in expressive ways is the meta-linguistic aspect of oral literature, a normative aspect that prescribes an ideal model of language. Indeed, it might be said that the ideal of oral literature is to render the verbal utterance truly memorable. This is an ideal with which we are familiar in written literature, one that is well illustrated by the way writers like Shakespeare and Pope have profoundly affected the English language. Oral delivery helps to give prominence to what is felt as the arresting power of language in its most exalted manifestations.

It is in this light that we need to envisage the reception of literature in an oral culture, a process that involves acts of judgment to which all instances of performance are subject. At such moments, standards of excellence are made explicit through the intervention of the audience, something that is often invoked in the dynamic context of performance itself. A striking example is provided by the text of the *Epic of Son-Jara*, which recounts the ascension of Sundiata, who founded the West African empire of Mali in the thirteenth century. In the version of the epic narrated by the griot Fa Digi Sissoko and translated by John Williams Johnson, the interjections of the audience, retained in the published text, demonstrate not only a keen sense of involvement in the narrative development on the part of the audience but also a critical vigilance in relation to the textual material of the epic.³¹ The same approach was adopted by J. P. Clark in his transcription of the Ozidi Saga, an editorial approach that helps us to take a full measure of its impact on its audience.³²

The three functions discussed above may be said to pertain to the ideal realm. The next three have a more worldly aspect and point more directly to a social application. Of these, the *didactic* function can be said to be the most recoverable, because of its relationship to the socialization process in oral cultures. In the narrow conception of this process, stories serve to illustrate situations in life from which a clear moral import is derived. This is abundantly clear in the folk tales for which children are the principal audience, even when adults are seen to participate in their performance and enjoyment. The didactic intent explains the fact that the action and narrative development in the category of folk tales addressed to children are structured around animal characters, who embody different aspects of human behavior. It is indeed remarkable that the didactic tales have generated cycles of stories focused on animal characters that feature as trickster figures and whose misadventures give point in each case to the animating moral idea of the plot. This explains the enormous appeal these stories have had for generations of African children and their preservation in the Black Diaspora. Two cycles immediately come to mind: the Br'er Rabbit stories in the United States, derived from the Sahelian cycle of the Wolof *Leuk*, and their equivalents in the Caribbean, the "Nancy tales" constructed around the figure of *Ananse*, the Spider, in the Akan culture of Ghana and Ivory Coast. The vicissitudes and reversals of fortunes that the trickster hero undergoes highlight the ethical meaning the tales hold out in traditional society, for it is in the nature and function of the stories that they serve as a channel of social criticism, so well exemplified by the numerous genres of satirical songs, such as the *udje* among the Urhobos of the Niger Delta, and the *halo* among the Ewe of Ghana.³³ The satirical content of the songs demonstrates the extent to which they are imbued with a distinctive moral awareness related to the collective life. There is thus a profound sense in which they bear out, in an arresting form, Henri Bergson's conception of "laughter" as an essential part of the mechanisms by which social life is regulated,³⁴ and which has been a key feature of African American humor since slavery.³⁵

This function is evident today in the satiric emphasis of rap and hip hop, in which, despite the extremes of irreverence to which they are thought to go, the critical spirit remains operative, even when the original context in Africa can no longer be reproduced or has been transformed by the urban technological milieu of their creation and performance.

The folk tales and satirical songs are vivid pointers to the way in which oral literature contributes to the elaboration of social codes. These tales and songs dramatize, so to speak, the ethical imperatives that are the foundation of social

order. They illustrate the essential relation of imaginative form to moral experience, summed up by Michael Jackson in this observation: "The creative power of language enables man to deny injustices, to bypass the realities of an imperfect world, and to manufacture mythologies of justice."³⁶

The functional relation between oral literature and social codes receives an even stronger articulation in those genres that are associated primarily with the public sphere, and which thus assume a distinct *ideological* function. The genre that most vividly illustrates this ideological function of African oral literature is the praise poem, often a development on the simple heroic epithet, expanding, in a series of parallelisms and historical allusions, into coherent compositions. We must distinguish here two senses of the term. It applies in the first instance in an obvious and immediate reference to poetry made up of panegyrics addressed to outstanding individuals or composed in celebration of heroes who embody the corporate sense and ideals of the society. This definition applies especially to the corpus of poems composed in honor of founding heroes such as Chaka, founder of the Zulu nation.³⁷ The great oral epics and myths of origin serve to memorialize the accomplishments of such heroes, and invariably incorporate the praise poems, which thus serve as the nodal points within the narrative of their achievement. The hunters' song (*djon-djon*) associated with Sundiata in the epic referenced above serve as a structural and formulaic device in the celebrated narrative of his rise to power and imperial eminence and thus reinforce the ideological thrust of the epic.

It is a short step from the ideological function of oral literature, as exemplified by the praise poem, to the *symbolic* function as a means of collective self-definition and of "cognitive mapping" for members of the culture. Because the symbolic realm is by definition a potential area of contestation, it is here that the discursive practice represented by oral literature takes on its most constraining character. Myths of origin not only extend the explanatory purpose of aetiological tales, but also offer a common reference, grounded in myth and history, of collective being and existence.

The symbolic function of oral literature is most evident in the narratives that accompany initiation rites, exemplified by works such as *Koumen* and *Kaidara* collected by Amadou Hampaté Bâ, for they not only provide a mode of reflection on human experience but also represent a relation to the world elaborated through language.³⁸ Myth assumes here a metaphysical import, serving as a mode of entry into the felt reality of the world.³⁹ The sense of a seamless whole formed by the seen and unseen aspects of this reality conditions the free play of the imagination in oral narratives. The parallel that has

been drawn between this mythic inclination of narrative and the “magic realism” of some contemporary novels does not perhaps take full cognizance of the fact that, for the oral narrator, the visionary is an immediate aspect of his or her conception of the world. In other words, “magic realism” assumes a fundamental significance in such an environment and climate of thought and represents what may be termed the default mode of the indigenous oral narrative in Africa.

The immediate connection between the symbolic function of oral literature and the historical imagination in Africa can be perceived in the fact that history in the oral tradition is conceived not so much as a faithful reconstruction of the past but rather as a recreation, a reactualization in the present of events in the course of which the original foundation of the collective existence was established.⁴⁰ Oral literature thus offers the means for the traditional society to acquire a consciousness of itself. Such a conception of history is especially amenable to the symbolic mode and contrasts sharply with the Western conception of “original history” as formulated by Hegel, for example:

Myths, folk songs, traditions are not part of original history; they are still obscure modes and peculiar to obscure peoples. Here we deal with peoples who knew who they were and what they wanted. Observed and observable reality is a more solid foundation for history than the transience of myth and epics.⁴¹

The limitations of the Western conception as defined here by Hegel become evident when it is set against the more expansive view of human destiny that myths offer. For literature enables traditional peoples to think in images, and thus to construct a vision that imposes coherence upon the world, an orientation well exemplified in the African context by Ogotomeli’s exposition to Marcel Griaule of the Dogon world system.⁴² It is useful in this regard to recall earlier uses of myth in Western culture, and to consider the way in which the symbolic function of African oral literature enables us to draw a parallel with other cultures whose cosmogonies have formed a cornerstone of the world’s literary heritage. For the apparent naturalism in works such as Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius serves as a basis for a moral and spiritual understanding of our place in the universe.

We must be careful, however, to avoid the evolutionist fallacy evident in Maurice Bowra’s *Primitive Song*, in which he posits non-Western literatures as merely holdovers from the infancy of the Western.⁴³ Rather, African oral literature serves as a demonstration of a fundamental anthropological disposition, what Cornelius Castoriadis calls the “central imaginary” in all human

cultures.⁴⁴ We can thus begin to see African oral literature in a comparative perspective, its significance as reflecting a truly heterogeneous and diversified experience of literary form. Above all, we need to envisage the imaginative phenomenon in Africa in its fundamental referential function, that is, as a central component of the symbolic field of awareness within which the whole realm of nature, including the human, is situated.

It is in this perspective that the imbrication of form and function in African oral literature assumes relevance in any account of the development of African American literature. This speaks not only to the artistic integrity of this literature, its value as a humanistic resource, but also to its significance as a historic and ethnic hinterland of African American literature. The fact of slavery and the massive displacement it occasioned are of course the decisive factor in the historic differentiation of the two bodies of literature. Even when specific correlations are difficult to establish, continuities in spirit and manner of enunciation can be recognized in the reinvention of the collective self that occurred among black populations in the New World. The general configuration of this new culture has been described by Henry Louis Gates:

Inadvertently, African slavery in the New World satisfied the preconditions for the emergence of a new African culture, a truly Pan-African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical and formal threads. What survived this fascinating process was the most useful and the most compelling of the fragments at hand. Afro-American culture is an African culture, with a difference as signified by the catalysts of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese or Spanish languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan African culture assumed.⁴⁵

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has provided a detailed account of the process by which the new composite culture alluded to by Gates developed in the specific case of Louisiana.⁴⁶ Two closely related aspects of this process are noted: acculturation to and reinterpretation of a new cultural model, resulting in the vigorous syncretisms that we observe in such diverse fields as music, religion, and language. The *santería* in Cuba, the *candomblé* in Brazil, and *vodun* in Haiti prolong in the New World African religious experience, reconstructed, as Roger Bastide has argued, from the structures of thought that the oral tradition had sustained for centuries on the ancestral continent, thus providing a symbolic resource for the transplanted Africans in their new environment.⁴⁷ In North America, black religious experience was more closely related to the Christian system of belief, a fact that was early demonstrated by the

emergence of the spirituals as a channel of self-reflection on the part of the African slave,⁴⁸ laying the foundation, as Ramey has pointed out, for the development of an African American lyric tradition.⁴⁹

The process of syncretism that has reshaped African cultural forms in the New World can be perceived readily in the emergence of varieties of black creole. Following Hall, Gomez has observed the specific linguistic character of a development that has been of direct significance for literary expression in the Black Diaspora. As he puts it, "There is both a retention of specific African words and a syntactical continuity that allows these words to be expressed in an African linguistic context, maximizing the conveyance not only of sound and meaning of the words themselves but also of the larger worldview and perspective they were created to describe."⁵⁰

But although the cultural identity of the transplanted African was largely embedded in orality, the encounter with writing proved to be a decisive factor in the fashioning of a black modernity and a new distinctive idiom of self-expression. Already, elements of the literate culture of Arabic associated with Islam, which had been the preserve of clerics on the continent, formed part of the cultural baggage of some of the slaves transported to America, though, as Gomez has pointed out, circumstances militated against the survival of this early Islam and its literature in America.⁵¹

It was with the slave narratives in English that the African imagination made its transition from orality to literacy in North America, a transition that may be said to have been signified in the trope of the talking book in the narratives of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Jea, and Olaudah Equiano, whose *The Interesting Narrative* was published in the significant year of 1789.⁵² Even before then, the transformation of the English language itself had been registered in the diary that the African middleman, Anterra Duke, kept in Pidgin of his transactions with European slave traders during the year 1787.⁵³

It is safe to say, however, that it was not until the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s that the African legacy came to assume a new meaning and purpose in a public culture for which literacy served as a primary mode of elaboration and expression.⁵⁴ The transpositions of the folk culture by James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes infused with meaning and vitality those oral forms that had been the mainstay of the folk imagination, and which Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* raised to a new level of expressive possibility.

In "Carma," one his evocations in *Cane*, Jean Toomer wrote: "The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa."⁵⁵ The trajectory he traces can be reinterpreted in literary terms as one that originates in the African oral

tradition and is reformulated in writing. This process finds its culmination in Toni Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved*, in which an imaginative reconstruction endows the collective experience with a moral and symbolic resonance, in the formal terms of a narrative procedure that integrates the total realm of consciousness that the African oral narrative has always sought to encompass. In this way, Morrison situates her work within the horizon of sentiment and image that extends to the African heartland and functions as an enabling background to the African American heritage.

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54. Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 18–56 and *passim*.
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Early print literature of Africans in America

PHILIP GOULD

In 1986, the literary critic William L. Andrews argued for the multiple registers on which antebellum slave narratives signify. The “free” story they tell recounts both the physical journey from slavery to freedom and also the more subtle struggle to write independently, especially in light of the prevailing racial attitudes in antebellum America that might distort black authorship. Insofar as this model imagines the scene of literary production as the arena of racial collaboration and conflict, it is useful for thinking about early black print literature – but only up to a point. This literature cannot simply be lumped together with the more canonical works of the antebellum period as a way of tightly suturing the continuities within the African American literary “tradition.” It emerged at a distinctive historical moment, and its formal and thematic complexity arises largely from that moment. This is a literature about movement – geographical, ontological, and rhetorical. As a way of accounting for this fluidity of personae and identities, Paul Gilroy has argued that we should reexamine our assumptions about the place of “race” and “nation” in this literature and read it instead in light of the “transcultural international formation” that he calls the “Black Atlantic.”¹ This includes the areas through which black subjects traveled as both free personae and bonded servants: the West African littoral, Britain, British America, eastern Canada, and the Caribbean. By thinking about early black literature in the context of such fluidity, and reinserting these works, whether written or related by black subjects, into the historical period known as the “Enlightenment,” we might not only account fully for the cultural range of these works but also alter our understanding of the (Western) Enlightenment itself.

Early black writing emerged as an identifiable genre during the second half of the eighteenth century and in the era of the Enlightenment. This is a rather large and unwieldy term that describes a number of philosophical and

ideological developments, some of which are germane to the study of early black print literature. Whether black subjects composed their own works, or related them orally to white editors, they were highly self-conscious of the potentially powerful yet vulnerable position that publication imposed upon them. Print culture, in other words, necessitated the construction of public personae for black subjects who were traditionally disenfranchised, culturally suspect, and often racially maligned. Since the very act of entering the “public sphere” involved the fragile dynamic between black subjects and white authorities – editors, patrons, and/or publishers – it is not surprising that early black writing demonstrates complex negotiations of the language and ideas normally associated with Enlightenment ideology. One cannot reduce this process to a single formula: the historical and ideological contexts for early black literature were mediated by individual sensibilities, genres, and audiences. But certain developments in this period undoubtedly had profound effects on early black discourse: natural rights philosophy, sentimentalism, affective forms of Christianity, and philosophical debates over the very nature of race.

The development of natural rights philosophy during the long eighteenth century provided black writers with an ideological foundation for arguing the terms of their own humanity. Rooted in a number of important, early modern philosophers, including Samuel Pufendorf, Emer de Vattel, Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, and, most importantly, John Locke, natural law philosophy generally undermined the traditional, Christian explanation for chattel slavery as the natural extension of the “slavery” of human sin. As numerous historians have shown, Locke’s theory of the social contract, explained fully in the *Second Treatise on Government*, justified overturning the existing form of government when it has failed to protect the “natural” rights to life, liberty, and property. The gradual popularization of natural rights thinking during the eighteenth century was also commensurate with the development of commercial capitalism and the rising influences of bourgeois social groups. Eighteenth-century Britons took pride in their nation as the paragon of freedom – indeed “British” was synonymous with enjoying personal liberties protected by the law. Over the course of the century, this idealistic thinking shaped the British conception of its expanding empire as commercial, Protestant, and free. Two striking features of early black writing thus come into clearer focus: the skillful management of the discourses of liberty (for audiences acculturated by this language), and the critique of the African slave trade, which went right to the moral foundation of Britain’s commercial empire.

The American Revolution inherited and disseminated the language of natural rights and English liberties. Obviously, the Lockean argument easily

obtained among those British Americans who actively resisted changes in British imperial policy, and it found consummate expression in the Declaration of Independence. Almost immediately, the Declaration became something of a rhetorical icon for early black writing that addressed slavery. It provided the language (e.g. "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," "Nature and Nature's God") with which to put local issues and individual suffering into an abstract, universal frame of reference. As the historian Gary Nash has argued, during the 1770s and 1780s African Americans logically "imbibed the ideology of natural and inalienable rights."²

The full ramifications of natural rights discourse for eighteenth-century black literature were complex and often ambiguous. Certainly, many black writers were quite savvy about turning the language of "liberty" and "slavery" to their own advantage, while simultaneously making the case for their own humanity. During the Revolution, slave petitioners to state governments made use of natural rights discourse and capitalized on the buried contradiction (one that antislavery activists were quick to point out) of a slaveholding republic. How could one avow principles of freedom while depriving African Americans of their liberty? As the historian Bernard Bailyn pointed out long ago, the many different contexts for antislavery discourse facilitated all sorts of rhetorical possibilities during the Revolution for connecting the respective plights of American and African American "slaves."³ After the Revolution, moreover, black writers continued to wield the language of liberty creatively. One cannot imagine the rhetorical power, for example, of Venture Smith's *Narrative* (1798) without the long history of the cultural dissemination of natural rights discourse preceding it. Nor can one appreciate the rhetorical ingenuity of Benjamin Banneker's public epistle to Thomas Jefferson, published in a local newspaper in 1792, which subtly exposes the irony that the author of the Declaration of Independence also keeps slaves.

But natural rights ideology cut both ways. It posed significant challenges to early antislavery activists in general and black writers in particular, both of whom were generally trying to marshal Locke's ideas to attack the moral foundations of slavery. The major stumbling block was that the Lockean tradition intimately connected natural rights with property rights. Indeed property was the lynchpin to the very concept of individual liberty. And since property functioned as the means by which one could claim these rights, and the public identity accompanying them, early proslavery apologists found the Lockean model of liberty and property just as easy to appropriate as their antislavery adversaries. Slaves were nothing more or less than their possessions – their property. This ideological stalemate led directly to one of

the central motifs in black writing from the 1770s at least until the American Civil War: the distinction between property and humanity.

This was all the more necessary in light of the fact that the Constitutional Framers conflated the two. In *Federalist* 54, for example, James Madison notoriously justified the clause whereby each slave accounted for $\frac{3}{5}$ of a person for purposes of taxation and representation: "But we must deny the fact that slaves are considered merely as property, and in no respect whatever as persons. The true state of the case is that they partake of both of these qualities ... The federal Constitution, therefore, decides with great propriety on the case of our slaves, when it views them in the mixed character of persons and property."⁴ Even well-intentioned, white antislavery writers often carelessly conflated the two. It was difficult, in other words, to simultaneously argue for the natural rights of Africans and to circumvent the Lockean correlation of liberty and property.

Secondly, the rise of the cultures of sentiment was crucial to the humanitarian argument and affective appeal of early black writing. As early as the late seventeenth century, new theories about human nature began to reshape traditional beliefs in the primacy of innate depravity, which permeated not only theological writings but also more secular philosophy, the most influential of which was Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. This new secular moral philosophy posited the existence of an innate "moral sense" in all human beings that governed the natural human affinity for beauty and virtue. Human beings were "naturally" benevolent, social creatures. Notwithstanding the fact that environmental influences could either nurture or distort the moral sense, the new belief in the innate capacity for human benevolence was crucial to the kinds of social and historical theories that developed over the course of the eighteenth century. Indeed much of this new moral philosophy was the product of the Scottish Enlightenment – works like Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) were influential on both sides of the Atlantic – and it created new models of understanding history. All human societies, the theory went, were progressing through the same stages – hunting, farming, commerce – on the path from barbarity to civilization, though at much different rates and with varying success. This provided black writers with another important ideological resource for addressing the universal category of "humanity."

The importance of sentimental culture to the development of early black writing can hardly be overstated. The very idea that sympathy was the touchstone of human morality, and human happiness, provided much of the ideological foundation for black writing's ability to argue for African humanity

and against the African slave trade. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century the African slave trade became something of a test case for British and British-American societies. Sentimental cultural assumptions also inform this writing's rhetorical tactics and stylistic features – tone, voice, the manipulation of persona, the rhetorical motif condemning “savage” behavior, and so forth. The discourses of sympathetic identification, moreover, were especially potent because they at once appealed to white readers' understanding of their own civilized humanity while simultaneously allowing them sufficient distance to safely witness the crimes of slavery (Smith, for example, held that one could never truly know another's pain; one could only imagine oneself in a similar position). This complex dynamic between intimacy and distance helps to explain the affective and humanitarian appeal of early black writing as well as the aesthetic and dramatic forms of the conventional scenes – for example, the capture by slave traders, the separation of families, and the miseries of the slave ship and the plantation – that were meant to fortify that appeal. Structured according to the logic of exposure, of “witnessing,” antislavery sentimentalism most often captures that complex dynamic as it brings white readers into the corrupt world of slavery while framing that dramatic lens, so to speak, in such a way as to allow white readers to maintain their racial and emotional space.

Many historians of race and slavery, however, have viewed antislavery sentimentalism skeptically. Because theories of sympathetic identification emphasized both the necessary distance between, in this case, white observers and suffering black slaves, and, moreover, the “delicious” and “self-approving” pleasures it afforded the former while indulging their capacities for refined feelings, the net result was often to lose focus on black subjects themselves. Indeed sentimentalism became something of a racial irritant to the scholarly fields of race and slavery. During the late 1960s, as “Black Studies” was beginning to establish itself as a legitimate academic field, the historian Winthrop Jordan made this type of argument about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antislavery reformers in both Britain and America. Certainly, much of the printed literature and visual iconography associated with early antislavery movements appears to modern eyes and ears as at the very least patronizing. If antislavery sentiment does belie the tendency to indulge white audiences in the pleasures of their sympathetic feelings, black writers still often were able to redirect affective excess to challenge and disrupt the moral and racial assumptions of these audiences.

Yet Enlightenment discourses of sympathy did pose major challenges for black subjects. One problem was that sentimental language, coupled with the

eighteenth-century penchant for universal categories, often implied the absence of racial and cultural difference (i.e., all human beings suffer in the same manner). Another was the rhetorical logic of sentimental antislavery writing, especially the poetry and fictional vignettes published anonymously in early American magazines, which culminated in scenes of suffering and death – and the “dying Negro” motif in early abolitionist writing. One of black writing’s major burdens, then, was to prevent that erasure by reformulating racial sympathy.

The third major ideological resource for early black literature came from eighteenth-century evangelical religion. Indeed the sentimental appeal of black writing was often framed in religious terms. This was largely due to important changes that were taking place in Protestant Christianity during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the historian David Brion Davis has shown, there really was no “contradiction” between Christian principles and the practice of slavery until the eighteenth century. Influenced by classical arguments in favor of slavery, early Christian theologians similarly argued that it was an effective means of preserving the social order. Indeed slavery itself was the logical extension – the punishment, in other words – of the human enslavement to sin. Beginning with new theological movements in the seventeenth century, however, and propelled by the development of sentimental culture later on, Christian theology gradually came to emphasize modern norms of moral virtue in keeping with sympathy and benevolence. The eighteenth-century trope, in other words, of the “man of feeling” permeated religious culture as well. This was especially important in new evangelical denominations that were forming in Britain and British America at this time – Methodists and Baptists, for example – that sacrificed theological casuistry on the altar of moral virtue and humanitarianism. No surprise, then, that many prominent literary figures of the early Black Atlantic – David George, Boston King, John Marrant, John Jea, and others – embraced evangelical religion and preached the Gospel themselves. (Many slaves even came to believe that Christian baptism immediately set one free.) Or that George Whitefield, the most famous evangelical figure in colonial British America, makes recurring appearances in this literature, as the subject of a Phillis Wheatley poem, for example, or the agent of John Marrant’s religious conversion.

Evangelical Christianity affected black print literature in primarily two ways. One was the influence that new denominations like the Methodists and Baptists had on the publication of black writing, a subject I will address below. The second was more thematic and rhetorical. Sentimental religious

discourses offered potent rhetorical resources. This does not mean that especially pious black writers like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon were merely “using” religion. But it does mean that the discourses of evangelical Christianity and sentimental benevolence did enable black writers to argue more effectively against slavery and for their own humanity. Consider, for example, one of the more effective rhetorical flourishes in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789): “O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice?”⁵

Both the complexity and the elasticity of late eighteenth-century language allowed black writing to talk about spiritual and physical forms of enslavement simultaneously. The discourses of Christian spirituality enforced the rhetorical project of antislavery. Skillful writers (or relaters) of personal stories, which in many cases recounted the simultaneous journeys from Africa to Britain and/or America and from heathenism to Christianity, could turn potentially ambiguous code words to their own advantage while still maintaining a sense of propriety. The Bible itself facilitated such rhetorical complexity. It provided resonant language and imagery, particularly about being “free,” that much of this early print literature construes in highly creative ways. Consider, for example, the passage from 2 Corinthians 3:17 (“Now the Lord is that spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”), which could serve as the epigraph to virtually all of the important slave narratives from this period. The most memorable works creatively play upon the entanglement of the multivalent meanings of words like “liberty.” Certainly the autobiographies of Equiano and Marrant achieve this, and Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” does so in two pithy quatrains encapsulating the African Diaspora.

These writers appropriated a wide array of religious mores in order to repossess “civilized” identities for themselves – a crucial rhetorical feat in light of widespread assumptions about the savage nature of African cultures. By the late eighteenth century, the very meaning of “Christian” identity encompassed a wide array of cultural attributes associated with civilized and enlightened manners. Equiano’s portrait, for example, in the frontispiece to the *Interesting Narrative* shows him holding a bible opened to Acts 4:12 (“Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved”). The

establishment of one's Christian – and civilized – identity further enabled the critique of the African slave trade. By reorganizing racial and cultural categories, black writers could turn traditional critiques of African "savagery" back onto Anglo-Americans participating in, or even benefiting from, the slave trade. This meant that the scene of religious conversion became something of a rhetorical passport to engage in wider domains of critique. It further enabled the crucial distinction this writing came to make between "true" and "false" Christians, which would become an important convention of the antebellum slave narrative.

The cultural leverage Protestant Christianity afforded black writing was all the more important in light of Enlightenment debates about the very meanings of "race" and "humanity." During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as Roxann Wheeler has argued, the category of race began to undergo important changes.⁶ Traditionally, the concept of race referred simply to a group of living things that was defined by geography and history. For much of the eighteenth century, racial ideology about the human world was shaped by a complex combination of biblical authority, the importance of environmental conditions (for physical differences among humans), and physiological theories of the human body's fluids. Most importantly, biblical authority supported the "monogenist" theory of humanity, which maintained the singular nature of humanity that could be traced to the "first parents," Adam and Eve. (Think of its recirculation in New Testament ideology as well, as Acts 17:26, for example claims: "And hath made of one blood all nations of men.") Most of the period's influential philosophical accounts of the history of human societies, moreover, accepted the premise of the universal category of "mankind." Conventional accounts of cultural differences, then, often were quite disparaging about the state of African or Native American societies, for example, though such arguments were not usually tagged to racial difference.

Dissenting theories accounting for human difference questioned both biblical authority and environmentalist thinking. It is hard for us to imagine, but the most obviously "racist" theories about human difference during the late eighteenth century came from the most self-consciously enlightened intellectuals who saw themselves as the vanguard for promoting human happiness: David Hume, Lord Kames, and Thomas Jefferson. Though these and other members of the transatlantic republic of letters did not reject Christianity out of hand, they did question the validity of biblical history, and many of them argued for the "polygenist" theory positing separate creations of mankind. This crucially drove a wedge in the traditional category

of “humanity” and provided the ideological foundations for the development of racial pseudo-science in the 1830s and 1840s. Generally, the meanings of “race” in this era began to draw more static and ineluctable connections between physical differences (especially skin color) and deeper moral and intellectual qualities. The most notorious examples of the toxicity of these new “enlightened” theories of race include Hume’s doubts whether any black poet could learn Latin, much less compose learned verses; similarly, Jefferson’s obsessive descriptions in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) of the supposedly repugnant features of African American slaves, and his particular disdain for the artistic work of Wheatley, clearly will haunt his reputation forever.

We can say that black print literature emerged at a time when the belief in the singular nature of the human race, and the accompanying four-stage theory of historical development, still prevailed. When progressive-minded British and American thinkers publicly defended the humanity of Africans – as many abolitionists did for Wheatley in the face of Jefferson’s critiques – they did so generally by marshaling biblical and environmentalist arguments. Perhaps it is too easy to overstate the case. Not only did many abolitionists harbor skeptical views about the equality of Africans, but even cultural and environmental arguments about human differences allowed a lot of room for establishing rather fixed hierarchies between European societies and the rest of the world.

The rise of organized institutions opposing slavery on both sides of the Atlantic provided an important impetus to and audience for black antislavery writing. Their proliferation in the 1770s and 1780s was preceded by important yet ambiguous legal cases in both Britain and British America adjudicating the legality of slave labor. The most famous of these was of course the case of *Somerset v. Steuart* that the Court of King’s Bench decided in 1772. Somerset, a Jamaican slave who had been residing in England for some time, and whose master now intended to return to the West Indies, sued for his freedom with the legal help of the famous English abolitionist Granville Sharp. Though the Court only reluctantly agreed to rule on the case, the result, known as the “Mansfield Decision,” generally endorsed the principle that British soil was meant for free people (a principle found as well in Blackstone’s *Commentaries*). “For those who supported James Somerset, the question at hand was not only whether Africans in England could be slaves but also whether England would remain English and free.”⁷ If Lord Mansfield’s ambiguous language did not set a clear legal precedent against British slavery, it did resound throughout the British Atlantic as a de facto victory for antislavery advocates. The case

increased the legal and moral distance between Britain and its profitable West Indian sugar islands where slave labor predominated.

New political organizations in Britain and America set out during the 1770s and 1780s to abolish the African slave trade. Indeed it is important to keep in mind the difference between abolition and the immediate emancipation of slaves, since the latter was seen as far more radical and potentially dangerous. White reformers often differed from their black counterparts over the need for immediate emancipation; and one argument the former group made was that abolishing the slave trade would kill the institution of slavery – in the long run. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society formed on the eve of the American Revolution (at about the same time that the Continental Congress was abolishing the African slave trade along with other pernicious “vices” like gambling, cock-fighting, and the theater, which might undermine the virtue of republican citizens). It re-formed its charter after the Revolution in 1784. In Britain, the most important organization was the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787). On both sides of the Atlantic these organizations were filled mostly with Quaker humanitarians; in Britain, liberal Anglicans and some social conservatives, who held a great disdain for Whig commercial interests, also played a major role. These organizations corresponded with one another both publicly and privately, and a few members even traveled back and forth across the Atlantic. They collectively generated a great deal of antislavery literature – books, pamphlets, epistles, institutional reports and proceedings, published sermons and orations, as well as a lot of visual and iconic materials – that marked the beginning of a transatlantic antislavery print culture.

The slave narrative was an important genre within antislavery print culture. It would be foolish to think that early black writing simply ventriloquized the humanitarian scripts of Anglo-American reform; or, conversely, to read black writing as a coherent project of ideological dissent. Rather, the most complex and powerful early slave narratives work within the ideological and rhetorical contours of enlightened antislavery, sometimes pressing certain issues defiantly, at other times deliberately controlling the impulse to condemn whites in general. A good example of the tonal complexity arising from the political contexts for abolition is the Preface to the *Interesting Narrative*, where Equiano directly addresses the British Parliament. Sometimes, moreover, the early slave narrative openly situates itself in a dialogic relation to Anglo-American antislavery discourse. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) obviously “signifies” upon the title of Thomas Clarkson’s

famous treatise, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1785), a work that may be seen as the intellectual charter of the English Anti-Slavery Society. Cugoana's work is the most sustained, rigorously focused condemnation of the African slave trade written by a black abolitionist during the late eighteenth century. Yet its polemical power derived in part from antislavery models provided by Clarkson, Sharp, and William Wilberforce.

One should resist overestimating the immediate impact of these early antislavery movements on either side of the Atlantic. They certainly did not transform, or even agitate, public opinion the way American abolitionists later would during the 1840s and 1850s. (Even then, most Americans considered radical abolitionists to be outside the cultural mainstream and dangerous to the social and political order.) And their overall effect on British-American print culture was nowhere near that which would later occur during the antebellum period. Still, the development of local and national antislavery organizations between the 1770s and the 1800s did expand the print arena in which black writers and speakers could protest the African slave trade and slavery itself. In Britain, anyway, the tradition of radical political publishing (the "Wilkes and liberty" movement, for example) had established itself by the time abolitionist works fully emerged. So the English Antislavery Society's decision to publish cheap pamphlets and tracts that could be read by many middling classes was nothing really new. Because of the continued power of London (and later Dublin and Edinburgh) imports to America, antislavery works easily made their way across the Atlantic.

Early institutional forms of antislavery also helped to create a popular visual iconography that disseminated antislavery sentiment and linked political and consumer cultures. The famous print created by Josiah Wedgwood of a kneeling slave, his eyes looking up to Heaven, with the underlying inscription, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?," could be found on everything from broadsides to medallions to living-room vases. The famous print of the slave ship *Brooke*, showing hundreds of silhouetted slave bodies lined up against one another in a striking image of cruel efficiency of transporting Africans across the Atlantic, similarly could be found reproduced in British and American magazines. The important antislavery activist Thomas Clarkson used to travel across Britain giving antislavery speeches, equipped with a trunk-full of actual relics – leg irons, brands, screws – to impress his audiences with the horrors of the slave trade. These kinds of political activities generally helped, then, not only to arouse popular sentiment against the inhumanity of the slave trade but also to circulate a number of politically inflected visual images that would work reciprocally with those one can find in the early print literature of

the Black Atlantic. In this sense, antislavery movements helped to forge a “culture” of antislavery in which both white and black actors participated, sometimes uneasily, with one another.

One should recognize that evangelical religious groups initially had more to do with publishing early black writing than did antislavery organizations. Methodists and Baptists, along with evangelical Anglicans, assumed the role of publishers: they assumed the financial risk for publication, and, in many cases, they provided the editorial apparatus for transcribing and presenting spiritual works to the public. Baptist and Methodist organizations literally brought figures like David George and Boston King into print as the means for carrying out sectarian polemics. The Countess of Huntingdon, head of the Methodist evangelical group known as the Christian Connexion, patronized many important black writers like Marrant and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (c.1705–75). When the advertisement for an edition of Phillis Wheatley’s poems did not get enough subscribers, she traveled to England in 1773, to have her book published there, under the auspices of the Countess. Often, too, the prefatory material that “frames” these narratives makes their ideological projects quite clear. For example, the Reverend Aldridge’s preface to *The Narrative of John Marrant* situates the black protagonist within the archetypal Christian story of conversion, and employs a good deal of biblical typology (e.g. Daniel and the Prodigal Son) and symbolism (the spiritual wilderness), as well as the advocacy of miracles (as Marrant speaks in the “Cherokee tongue”), to flesh out the *Narrative*’s full meaning.

The popularity of these narratives lay partly in their generic diversity and their capacity to appeal to multiple audiences simultaneously. They combined different genres and discourses, including spiritual autobiography, confessional, travel narrative, sea adventure, Indian captivity ethnography, and the picaresque; they often blended serious religious messages with exotic locales and adventurous plots. Yet reviews of black literary works were at best ambivalent. Reviewers generally approved of the morally edifying potential of Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) or *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782). But they could be quite condescending as well. When assessing Equiano’s work, for example, the *Monthly Review* suggested that “it is not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in the compliment, or, at least, the correction of the book: for it is sufficiently well-written.”⁸ The *Gentleman’s Magazine* claimed the *Interesting Narrative* was “written in a very unequal style,” but offered this praise together with the negative assertion that “there is no general rule without an exception.”⁹

One should also recognize that financial considerations also lay behind the publication of early black writing. In the early 1760s, the Boston publishing firm of Green and Russell took a chance on Briton Hammon's *Narrative* not out of antislavery convictions but because of their belief in the market potential of a picaresque tale of captivity. It is true that sales figures for individual works are generally imprecise, but we do know that the narratives of Gronniosaw, Marrant, and Equiano, for example, were popular enough to go through multiple editions. These works were published in London and, with the advent of provincial printing in the eighteenth century, later republished in places like Dublin and Edinburgh (and sometimes in America). The economic potential of this genre was such that even smaller publishing houses sometimes participated in republishing those works that had proven their market value. When Gronniosaw, for example, was republished in Salem, New York in 1809, it was retitled simply *The Black Prince* (adapting the phrase "an African Prince" from its original, lengthy title), a move that suggests a different kind of marketing strategy. Moreover, sometimes black subjects themselves realized the financial potential of their writing and capitalized on it. Certainly, Wheatley's private letters reveal her self-consciousness about the sales of her work. Perhaps Equiano is the consummate example of the literary capitalist during this early period. He kept the copyright to the *Interesting Narrative*, registered in the British Stationer's Office, in his own name, instead of selling it (as was often done) to a bookseller doubling as publisher. He had little doubt that it would sell quite well.

Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. Gary Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1990), p. 58.
3. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
4. Clinton Rossiter (ed.), *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library Penguin, 1961), p. 337.
5. Werner Sollors (ed.), *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* [1789], Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 43.
6. Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).
7. Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 96.
8. Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 297.
9. *Ibid.*

The emergence of an African American literary canon, 1760–1820

VINCENT CARRETTA

The sixty years of African American literary history between 1760, when works authored by people of African descent were first published, and the Missouri Compromise in 1820, when the institution of slavery was officially recognized as fundamental to the United States, fall into three periods. The first, from 1760 to the early 1770s, was marked by the evolution and establishment of a transatlantic black identity that transcended national and geographical boundaries, an identity that persists. During the second period, between the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, an American identity increasingly seemed available to people of African descent residing in the new United States. That expectation appeared to be dashed after 1808, as the political and social victories achieved during the first emancipation were rolled back, making emigration from the United States to Africa a subject of public controversy.

When the earliest texts of what we now recognize as the African American literary canon first appeared, however, they were rarely seen as either African or American. Furthermore, few such texts were considered literary, in the sense of being works whose form and style were intended to be at least as significant as their content. Many of the early autobiographical texts were authored though not written by their subjects. These as-told-to narratives are accounts by blacks recorded by white amanuenses. Hence, the following brief overview of the period from 1760 to 1820 often refers to authors rather than writers, and frequently to texts or writings rather than literature. Such writings comprise manuscript as well as printed texts, and range widely in genre, including captivity narratives, letters, poetry, spiritual autobiographies, sermons, pamphlets, criminal confessions, abolitionist arguments, and slave narratives. As-told-to narratives present the reader with obvious problems of trying to identify the authentic black voice behind the words transcribed by his or her amanuensis. But even recognizing the message behind words directly

transmitted to us by black authors can be challenging, because those words usually had to pass through white hands to find their way into print.

People of African descent living in what would become the United States began to embrace publicly a diasporan social and political identity of *African* only toward the end of the eighteenth century. In North America, as well as in Britain, some of the people removed from Africa as slaves, and their descendants, started to call themselves “Sons of Africa.” The as-told-to account of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1710?–1775), *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of ... an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772), is the earliest case of an author identified as “African.” In a sense, *Africa* did not exist as an idea rather than a place until after the antislave trade and antislavery movements began. The indigenous peoples of Africa did not think of themselves as *African*: they considered themselves any one of a number of ethnic groups with differing languages, religions, and political systems. Once enslaved and transported across the Atlantic Ocean, they and their descendants became *African* in the eyes of themselves and their enslavers only in the Americas.

Like their white owners and neighbors, people of African descent living before the 1770s in what subsequently became the United States did not think of themselves as American because that political identity was simply not available to them. Furthermore, during and after the American Revolution such a political identity was often either unattractive or denied to even free people of African descent, and irrelevant to the enslaved. All of the eighteenth-century black authors were at least at some point in their lives African British, either subjects themselves of the British monarch, or legally defined as the property of his subjects. But the end of the American Revolution in 1783 gave these authors the chance for redefinition, either by choice or by imposition. To many slaves in the former British colonies, England remained the legal refuge it had become in 1772, when the Earl of Mansfield ruled that any slave brought by an owner to England could not legally be forced back into colonial slavery. But even after the American Revolution, identifying authors of African descent by political nationality is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, because people like Olaudah Equiano, John Marrant, and Phillis Wheatley, who crossed the Atlantic in both directions, were disqualified by virtue of desire, class, gender, or phenotype from being citizens of the United States. Yet all played an important role in the development of the African American canon through their physical presence, subject matter, and transatlantic publication, as well as the reception of their writings.

Author of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), Equiano (1745?–1797) most fully exemplifies the challenge we face in trying to categorize in national terms the first generation of black writers, most of whom were denied legal and often even human identities. In “The Negro in Literature and Art,” published in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in September 1913, W. E. B. Du Bois rightly identified Equiano as the founder of what would become the genre of the African American slave narrative. Equiano, however, never represented himself as African American. Equiano classified himself among the “citizens of the world,” an appropriate description of the men and women of African descent who embraced trans- or supra-national identities when national identities were denied them during the eighteenth century. Making a virtue of a defect, by assuming a range of available identities, many of the eighteenth-century writers of African descent resurrected themselves from the social death slavery had imposed on them or their ancestors. At times, one feels that in the earliest works ethnicity and status are mentioned in passing simply to imply the universality of the experiences recounted.

Categorizing black writers by genre is as difficult as classifying them by national affiliation. Most of the writings by the first generation of authors of African descent are multigeneric, and should be read and assessed on their own historical terms, rather than as anticipating later generic expectations and conventions. In many of the early black narratives, for example, the author’s ethnicity and status as enslaved or free seem incidental to tales that combine elements of adventure, conversion, crime, and travel. Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is a captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, slavery narrative, economic treatise, apologia, and perhaps in part historical fiction, as well as an argument against the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, all within the framework of a spiritual autobiography.

Religion gave the first generation of people of African descent the motive, means, and opportunity to become authors, either directly or through white amanuenses. With the notable exception of Venture Smith, every early black author endorsed Protestant Christianity, most often in the form of Methodism, with its belief in predestinarian Calvinism preached by George Whitefield and the clergymen associated with his aristocratic patron, the Countess of Huntingdon. The beliefs that salvation was freely granted by God rather than earned by humans, and that particular people were predestined to be saved, appealed to many eighteenth-century people of African descent. The evangelical Methodists took religion to the people, rather than waiting for the people to come to church, and they saw all levels of society,

including slaves, as having a potential share in salvation. When physical liberation from enslavement in the present seemed impossible, spiritual freedom and equality in the afterlife offered some solace. A faith that depends on predestination for salvation rather than on spiritual rewards for good works appealed to those whose ability to perform good works was severely limited by their social condition. Moreover, Protestant emphasis on direct access to the Bible encouraged the spread of literacy even to slaves. The use of lay preachers by Methodists within the Church of England, as well as by the Protestant sects that dissented from the Church of England, gave blacks the authority and opportunity to guide others through speech and print. And the expectation that Christians bear witness to their faith encouraged them to do so. Undoubtedly underlying the emphasis on religion in most of the writings by eighteenth-century black authors was the long-standing belief that conversion to Christianity merited emancipation from slavery, a belief so strong that it led to colonial statutes denying its validity.

For most eighteenth-century black writers, Protestant Christianity with its emphasis on direct knowledge of the Bible was the primary motive for literacy. Black authors, including Gronniosaw, Marrant, and Equiano, acknowledged the power of literacy by repeatedly employing the motif of the talking book, usually the Bible or another religious work, to demonstrate the alleged cultural and religious superiority of writing and Christianity to orality and other religions. An encounter with a book that did not speak to him repeatedly played a crucial role in the conversion process of the black author. Virtually all the early publications in prose took the form of spiritual autobiographies that trace the transition from pagan beliefs to the Christianity shared with the authors' British and American readers. In each case, men and women escape from some type of physical captivity, whether it be the enslavement of Gronniosaw or the captivity by Indians suffered by the free black John Marrant (1755–91) in *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785). Even the *Life and Confession* (1786) of Johnson Green (1757–86) and other confession narratives by blacks are represented as cautionary spiritual autobiographies, sensationalist though they are as criminal tales.

The notably non-conversion *Narrative* (1798) by Venture Smith (1729–1805) may reflect in its form the bitter irony of Smith's being a subject of the United States of America, mentioned on his title page, and his disillusion at the end of the century with the failed promises of the "first emancipation," the term Alfred Zilversmit used in his book of the same title. Smith's text is the only example of a work written or dictated by a black during the period that is entitled a "narrative" but is not a story of conversion, and his reference to the

“Christian land” in which he lives is clearly ironic. Smith is pointedly only a “resident” of the country. As his amanuensis reminds us in the preface, Smith had been denied the citizenship and thus the opportunities that might have allowed him to rival the achievements of Benjamin Franklin or George Washington. Given Smith’s resistance to the Christianity professed by his white neighbors, his illiteracy may reflect a rejection of the Protestant emphasis on literacy.

Other than the secular manuscript poem by Lucy Terry (1730?–1821) about a New England skirmish, “Bars Fight” (1746, but not published until 1855), the earliest known writings by North Americans of African descent appeared in 1760: *A Narrative of the Most Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* by Briton Hammon (fl. 1747–60), and (apparently no relation) *An Evening Thought. Salvation, by Christ, with Penitential Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro Belonging to Mr. Lloyd* by Jupiter Hammon (1711–c.1806). Neither Hammon seems to have known the other, and neither was known to any of the succeeding African British or African American authors, probably because their works were published solely in the provinces of the British Empire and never reprinted in London. Both authors implicitly accept the institution of slavery, perceiving the metaphorical enslavement to sin as more threatening than physical enslavement. Indeed, Briton’s condition as free or enslaved is unclear. Neither Briton nor Jupiter Hammon may have felt overly offended or oppressed by the reality of slavery because they were fortunate to live in colonies where the conditions of slavery were generally relatively mild (as compared, for example, with those in the West Indies), and in a period when the separate colonies had a great deal of latitude in the creation of internal legislation. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of works by black writers were first published in urban centers – London, Philadelphia, New York, Boston – in societies with slaves, rather than slave societies, with significant populations of free blacks, as well as established networks of publication and distribution.

Briton Hammon’s *A Narrative* and Jupiter Hammon’s *An Evening Thought* are both about physical or spiritual captivity, liberation, and restoration. When Briton is captured by Caribbean Indians, who sell him to the Governor of Spanish Cuba, he is rescued by the captain of an English ship who refuses to “deliver up any *Englishman* under *English Colours*” (emphasis in original)¹ to the Spaniards. Through God’s providence, he is reunited with his “Master” (probably employer rather than owner), and together they return to Massachusetts. Briton emphasizes his physical captivity, while Jupiter focuses exclusively on his spiritual captivity by sin and his faith in liberation

by Christ, perhaps because Briton was a captive only part of his life, and Jupiter was unusual among the early black authors because he was never free. If Briton and Jupiter Hammon had not each been identified as “a Negro,” nothing in either of these first two works would have enabled us with certainty to recognize their authors as African Britons. But Briton and Jupiter Hammon used the two primary forms employed by almost every one of the later black authors: the autobiographical prose narrative with varying degrees of religious implications, and the religious poem.

Although the works of both Hammons are now widely acknowledged as canonical African American literature, we have no evidence that either author contributed to the tradition of African American literature by influencing any succeeding author of African descent. Briton Hammon is sometimes seen as the originator of the African American slave narrative, but that distinction more rightly belongs to Gronniosaw, whose *Narrative* introduced a number of the conventions, motifs, and themes found in subsequent works, most notably a white amanuensis or witness who testifies to the veracity of the account, and whose textual presence indicates that the production of the text has been supervised. Gronniosaw's *Narrative* was the first of many texts that use autobiography to bear witness against slavery. Briton Hammon's *Narrative* is a story of spiritual and social restoration, though whether to a free or enslaved condition is unclear. Gronniosaw's tale is one of spiritual and social redefinition, like the typical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives that followed.

Fictional and non-fictional accounts of enslaved African princes or nobles preceded Gronniosaw's *Narrative*. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most Britons and Anglo-Americans did not believe that being of African descent necessarily meant that one was suited for slavery. Throughout the eighteenth century the more hierarchical Britons recognized slavery as an inappropriate status for at least some Africans. Even after the American Revolution, Anglo-Americans tended to acknowledge the significance of social status. And on both sides of the Atlantic, before the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, claims of noble or royal birth by wrongly enslaved Africans were at least plausible, no matter how improbable. But those fortunate Africans were a precious few, outside of fictional accounts. Prior to 1760, the fictional and historical subjects of such accounts tended to be non-Christian enslaved Africans who either were repatriated to Africa, or died in the New World resisting their enslavement. Following the midcentury transatlantic Great Awakening of evangelical religious revivalism, stories of people of African descent who converted to Christianity began to be published.

A transatlantically distributed work, Gronniosaw's *Narrative* was first published in London in 1772, and subsequently reprinted in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1774; in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1781; and serially in the *American Moral and Sentimental Magazine* (New York) in 1797. The *Narrative* is framed by a Preface by Walter Shirley, a Methodist clergyman, who assures readers that "this little History contains Matter well worthy the Notice and Attention of every Christian Reader."² According to his *Narrative*, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw was born into the royal family of Bournou (Bornu), a kingdom located in what is now northeastern Nigeria. When he was an adolescent, Gronniosaw accepted the invitation of a perfidious African merchant to accompany him to the Gold Coast, more than a thousand miles away. The merchant soon sold Gronniosaw to European slave traders, who brought him to Barbados. From Barbados he was taken to New York City, where he was sold to a wealthy Reformed Dutch clergyman in New Jersey. His new master, a friend of the English evangelist George Whitefield, renamed him James Albert, and converted him to Christianity. Gronniosaw gained his freedom when his master died, and soon thereafter moved to England, where he was very disappointed to discover that the English were no more pious than Anglo-Americans. Whitefield helped him find housing in London, where he married a widowed English weaver. Gronniosaw and his growing family led a somewhat nomadic life in England, depending on a series of Quaker contacts for employment and charity. His extreme poverty notwithstanding, Gronniosaw's tale ends with his Christian faith unshaken.

Unlike most post-eighteenth-century writings by people of African descent, Gronniosaw's life was one of freedom lost and regained. Like Equiano and Phillis Wheatley, Gronniosaw recounts a life that was initially physically free, though, unlike theirs, his is not represented as a time of true innocence lost. For nineteenth-century authors such as Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass, however, rather than a memory, freedom was a dream that could be realized only in an imagined future. Childhood for such an author was at best a brief state of false consciousness of freedom, out of which he or she would soon be shocked.

Born around 1753 somewhere in West Africa, probably between present-day Gambia and Ghana, the little girl who would become Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784) was brought to Boston in 1761. Wheatley was given an extraordinary education for a girl at the time, and an unprecedented one for a female slave. Within four years, she was writing poems that frequently combined Christian piety and Classical allusions, and several of which were published in

local newspapers. Wheatley's occasional poems, that is, poems on recent events, culminated in her 1770 funeral elegy addressed to the Countess of Huntingdon, on the death of her chaplain, Whitefield. The elegy brought Wheatley both international fame and the Countess's attention when it was republished in London in 1771.

Wheatley had written enough poems before she was twenty years old to enable her to try to capitalize on her growing transatlantic reputation by producing a book of previously published and new verse. Unfortunately, despite Wheatley's local reputation as a poet, sufficient support for the project was lacking. Having failed to find backing in Boston, Wheatley's owner turned to London for a publisher, who produced Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, on the condition that the volume be prefaced by a document signed by Boston worthies attesting to the authenticity of the poems for an English audience. The Countess of Huntingdon allowed Wheatley to dedicate *Poems* to her. In a letter written to the Countess during her six-week visit to London, Wheatley acknowledges Gronniosaw as her literary predecessor, thus recognizing a tradition of English-speaking writers of African descent, as well as the Countess's role in enabling such writers to gain access to print. She subsequently supported the publication of religiously oriented works by other black authors, including Marrant's *A Narrative* and Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*. The publication of *Poems* enabled Wheatley to display her talents in various forms of verse, such as the hymns, elegies, translations, philosophical poems, tales, and epyllions (short epics), all of which had been written while she was still a teenager.

In "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," first composed when she was about fifteen years old, Wheatley appropriates the persona of authority or power normally associated with men and social superiors. She speaks as a teacher to students, or a minister to his flock, in addressing the young men of what was to become Harvard University, many of whom were being trained there to become ministers themselves. Confident that "the muses" will "assist my pen," she asserts her authority as one who has "left my native shore/The land of errors" and "those dark abodes," who has known "sin, that baneful evil to the soul," and who has rejected it to embrace the "Father of mercy." From a position of moral superiority gained through experience she speaks as an "Ethiop" to warn her implicitly complacent students – "Ye pupils" – to "Improve your privileges while they stay."³ Audaciously, the teenaged, enslaved, self-educated, female, and formerly pagan poet assumes a voice that transcends the "privileges"

of those who are reputedly her superiors in age, status, abilities, authority, and gender.

Wheatley's poems demonstrate a nuanced treatment of slavery. For example, written in October 1772 to celebrate Dartmouth's appointment the previous August, "To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c."⁴ is one of the most carefully crafted poems in the 1773 volume. In it Wheatley reappropriates the concept of *slavery* from its common metaphorical use in the colonial rhetoric of discontent, which described any perceived limitation on colonial rights and liberty as an attempt by England to "enslave" (white) Americans. Wheatley appears to use *slavery* in this conventional sense in the poem:

No more, *America*, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.

But Wheatley's reference to her authority to speak against this conventionally metaphorical slavery reminds her readers of the reality of chattel slavery trivialized by the political metaphor:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By Feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
...
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?⁵

Wheatley was granted her freedom soon after she returned to America in September 1773. Having gone to England as an enslaved African Briton, Wheatley returned to the colonies prepared to embrace the free African American identity the American Revolution would make available to her. As her letter to the Native American minister Samson Occom denouncing slavery indicates, once back in Boston Wheatley increasingly came to believe that the colonial struggle for freedom from Britain would lead to the end of slavery in the former colonies. Her antislavery stance became more overt than

in her poems published while she had been enslaved. For example, in “On the Death of General Wooster,” Wheatley exclaims,

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
Divine acceptance with th’Almighty mind –
While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace
And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?”⁶

Wheatley established the tradition of African American literature when she acknowledged Gronniosaw’s work. Wheatley’s literary achievement, in turn, was recognized by contemporary people of African descent. For example, although Jupiter Hammon’s previous work was very probably unknown to Wheatley, hers became the subject of one of his poems. Significantly, Hammon chose to respond in his *Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly, Ethiopian Poetess* (Hartford, 1778) to her “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” a poem about her paradoxical deliverance from the spiritual slavery of Africa to her physically enslaved but spiritually liberated condition in America. Still a slave in 1778, Hammon probably needed to be more circumspect in how he treated the subject of slavery than the now free and hence more outspoken Wheatley could afford to be. All black writers had to deal with the problematic paradox which from a Christian perspective might be called a fortunate fall into physical enslavement that introduced the enslaved to spiritual freedom. Apologists for slavery argued that the transatlantic slave trade was justified in part because it introduced Africans to Christianity. Most black writers sought to solve the problem, as Wheatley does, by claiming the authority to identify the true spirit of Christianity violated by those who endorse slavery.

Even advocates of slavery, who denied the achievement of black writers, implicitly acknowledged the developing black canon by disputing the quality of the authors’ literary productions. Thomas Jefferson notoriously expressed this sort of negative recognition in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787): “Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus [inspiration] of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions composed under her name are below the dignity of criticism.”⁷ Although Wheatley infrequently addresses the issue of slavery itself, abolitionists from the 1780s on invoked her poems as irrefutable evidence of the literary and intellectual capacities of Africans.

As Wheatley’s poem “To His Excellency General Washington” (1775) demonstrates, some free blacks chose the new African American identity

that was becoming available. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, during the period known as the “first emancipation,” the antislavery movement grew, especially in the Northern states, where access to education, as well as laws abolishing slavery and granting some rights enjoyed by free, property-owning, white males all became increasingly common. Employing the common trope of Africa as a paradise lost through enslavement by Europeans, and the logic of natural rights, the petition of the ex-slave Belinda to the Massachusetts legislature for compensation for her past labor from the estate of her former Loyalist master, as well as the petition to the Massachusetts legislature for freedom and equal rights by Prince Hall (1753?–1807) and seven other blacks, both indicate how optimistic some African Americans were about the possibility of achieving universal freedom and justice based on the principles of the Revolution.

The Declaration of Independence quickly became a secular scripture bearing almost as much authority as the Bible in arguments for the equal rights and humanity of people of African descent in the United States. Anticipating later African American writers, Lemuel Haynes (1753–1833) in his unfinished and undated manuscript “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-keeping” intertextually combines the secular and biblical scriptures to make his point that universal rules of liberty by definition applied to all humans. Absalom Jones and seventy-three others petitioned the federal government in 1799 for gradual emancipation on the basis of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. When James Forten (1766–1842) argued successfully in his “Series of Letters by a Man of Colour” (1813) against the passage by the Pennsylvania legislature of racially discriminatory laws, he began by citing the premise of the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. In a rhetorically superb public letter to Jefferson (1792) Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806) skewered him by citing the Declaration to show that Jefferson’s own words obligated him to renounce slavery. And by pointedly sending Jefferson the letter written in Banneker’s “own handwriting,” Banneker implied that his own example refuted the racist claims of African inferiority Jefferson had made in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Not all people of African descent saw the new United States as the promised land of freedom and equality. In his *Address to the Negroes in the State of New York* (1787), Jupiter Hammon counseled his fellow slaves to obey their masters faithfully, anticipating happiness in the hereafter: “We live so little in this world that it is no matter how wretched and miserable we are, if it prepares us for heaven.”⁸ Venture Smith, however, was unwilling to suffer silently for a posthumous award he never acknowledges. Many thousands of

others, including the black authors David George (1743?–1810?), Boston King (1760?–1802), and George Liele (1751?–1825), apparently decided that God helps those who help themselves. They emancipated themselves during the American Revolution by fleeing their owners to join the British forces, who evacuated them as free people to Canada and Africa following the British defeat.

Blacks who remained in the United States quickly began to form educational, fraternal, mutual aid, and religious societies, paradoxically both to demonstrate their suitability for citizenship, and as a response to their exclusion from full membership in the equivalent white societies in the new country. The writings associated with these African American societies frequently display a more assertive tone and argument in primarily addressing their constituents than we find in contemporaneous black writings aimed largely at white readers. For example, in *A Charge, Delivered to the African Lodge June 24, 1797*, Prince Hall appeals to distant as well as recent, biblical as well as secular, history, including an ominous invocation of the successful slave revolt in Haiti, to urge his fellow Masons to resist persecution by their white neighbors.

Perhaps the high point of optimism about the possible full political and social inclusion of blacks in the United States came in January 1808, when the country abolished the transatlantic slave trade. In a series of annual commemorative sermons and orations, African Americans expressed their hope that the abolition of the institution of slavery itself would soon follow: Absalom Jones (1746–1818), *A Thanksgiving Sermon* (1808); Peter Williams (c.1780–1840), *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1808); Joseph Sidney (?–?), *An Oration Commemorative of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1809); Henry Sipkins (1788–1838), *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1809); George Lawrence (?–?), *Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1813); Russell Parrott (1791–1824), *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1814); and William Hamilton (1773–1836), *An Oration, on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1815). Like most African American authors before and after them, the commemorators of the abolition frequently grounded their arguments against the slave trade and slavery on revisionist or even counterfactual versions of histories written by whites. For example, in his *Oration, on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Delivered in the Episcopal Asbury Church*, Hamilton, identified on the title page as “A Descendant of Africa,” counterfactually notes, “Would to God that Columbus with his exploring schemes had perished in Europe ere he touched the American Isles ... Then might Africa been spared the terrible calamity she has suffered.”⁹

Unfortunately, the optimism prompted by the abolition in 1808 proved premature, and the dawn of the “first emancipation” a false one. As *A Dialogue*

between a Virginian and an African Minister, a Descendant of Africa ... Minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore (1810) by Daniel Coker (1780–1846) shows, pervasive white resistance to ending slavery forced black authors to be quite circumspect when addressing the issue to a white audience. The initial achievements of black and white abolitionists in the Northern states began to be stalled and reversed in the early nineteenth century. Respectively frustrated and frightened by attempts to gain full equal rights for African Americans, each side of the slavery issue saw emigration or expulsion of blacks from the United States as the possible solution to the American problem of race. As early as 1773, four Boston slaves had petitioned for freedom to emigrate to Africa. And in 1787, Jefferson advocated the ethnic cleansing of freed slaves from the United States to remove them “beyond the reach of mixture.”¹⁰ During the second decade of the nineteenth century, the back-to-Africa, or at least out-of-the-United-States movement became a major public issue for black writers. For example, in *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone in Africa* (1812), Paul Cuffee (1759–1817) offered his fellow blacks the image of an idyllic refuge from racism and abuse they experienced in the United States. On the other hand, in “To the Humane and Benevolent Inhabitants of the City and County of Philadelphia” (1818), James Forten warned that calls for emigration played into the hands of those who sought to consolidate the system of slavery by purging the United States of its free blacks. In the end, of course, African Americans’ faith in the promise of the United States triumphed over their experience, but that promise would not be realized for many decades to come. By 1820 six new slave states and one million more slaves had been added to the United States since 1790. And the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which admitted a slave state as tit-for-tat for every new free state, meant that the African American dream of full civic and social equality would continue to be deferred.

Notes

1. Vincent Carretta (ed.), *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996; rev. edn 2004), pp. 20, 23.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
3. Vincent Carretta (ed.), *Phillis Wheatley, Complete Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2001), pp. 11–12.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

7. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* [London, 1787], ed. William Harwood Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), p. 140.
8. Carretta, *Unchained Voices*, p. 20.
9. Dorothy Porter (ed.), *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classics Press, 1995), pp. 391, 396.
10. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, p. 143.

Dividing a nation, uniting a people: African American literature and the abolitionist movement

STEFAN M. WHEELLOCK

The 1820s signal a decisive turn in the development of African American literature. The vocabularies of collective black resistance and reform – acting as a familiar refrain in much of what may be considered as African American creative and political expression for the better part of the nineteenth century – take center stage during this period. As a point of fact, early nineteenth-century black American writers were not the first to stress issues of emancipation, equality, and racial unity. These themes may be found in African American/ Atlantic writing as early as the 1780s. The nineteenth-century black writers of this period are, then, in an important sense heirs to a much older tradition in rhetoric. Yet, early nineteenth-century black writers were founding figures in a critical era in political and cultural transformation. They would employ the themes of black resistance and reform as a way to imagine a more robust (and less fragmented) African American identity; as a way to coax antislavery resistance toward more radical postures; and as a way to expose the racist underbelly of an American democratic project beholden to slaveholding influence. This in turn set the ideological and discursive framework for black writing to transition toward a literature occupied primarily with the black experience in the United States. The former slave narrator and celebrated abolitionist Frederick Douglass drew both moral and political inspiration from this crucial stage in written expression, penning some of the most piercing insights into the legacies of slaveholding brutality to have been produced by an African American author in the nineteenth century.

The innovations in African American writing in the 1820s were informed largely by a gradual, albeit dramatic, shift in political and cultural perspective. The publishing organs of emergent early nineteenth-century white abolitionist movements combined with an expanding number in black social/religious

institutions and societies to provide African American writers with a space in which to nurture, share, and express their ideas and creativity. The nineteenth-century relationship between African American writers and white abolitionist editors would prove to be especially dramatic and complex, as publishers exerted varying degrees of editorial and ideological control over the form, content, and scope of an author's work. The textual tension between William Lloyd Garrison's preface and Frederick Douglass's narrative in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and, to a lesser degree, the tension between Lydia Maria Child's preface and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) are the more familiar examples. *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831) by Mary Prince (1788–1833?) is an especially fascinating example in this regard. (I return to Prince's narrative below.)

The cultivation of a radical antislavery vision and emancipationist focus in the literature of the period owes much to a complex set of historical events. There was the Saint Domingue Revolution (1791–1804), which sent shockwaves through the Atlantic at the turn of the century. The sheer audacity of hundreds of thousands of black slaves to overthrow their masters and establish the first black Republic in the Atlantic world shocked whites and provoked a range of responses from European slaveholding superpowers. On the other hand, blacks from various sectors of the Atlantic were both inspired and encouraged by this decade-long struggle for independence. In the case of North America, the fervor of the Haitian Revolution joined with an already growing black discontent in the South and North to inaugurate a new, more aggressive version of black resistance. The immigration of thousands of Francophone blacks to the North American mainland brought with it a message of hope and possibility.

Peter Hinks has argued that in the case of the United States "[t]he years 1800–1831 comprised the period of the most active and carefully planned slave conspiring in American history." There was Gabriel's conspiracy in 1800; the Easter Plot of 1801–2; the uprisings in Louisiana in 1811–12; the [Denmark] Vesey conspiracy of 1822; and Nat Turner's march in Southampton in 1831.¹ Meanwhile, on the national level, Britain and the USA had ended their traffic in slaves in 1807 and 1808 respectively. By the 1820s, Britain had been slightly more than a decade from ending slavery in its colonies altogether. It would, however, take the Civil War to end slavery in the United States. One of the most significant slave conspiracies of the nineteenth century had been directly influenced by the events in Saint Domingue. The so-called Denmark Vesey Conspiracy of 1822 serves as a benchmark for an ever increasing black

restiveness. Vesey and his co-conspirators planned to incite a slave revolt which they hoped would evolve into slave rebellion on a national scale. Their hopes were never realized, primarily because of betrayal within Vesey's ranks. But the event had left its spiritual mark, as both the black leaders and major writers of the period were acutely aware of the need for coalition and collective resistance.

Add to this the growing popularity of efforts to relocate free black American populations to Africa. Founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society's express purpose was to improve the conditions of impoverished and disempowered free black communities through assisting them in finding a suitable place for settlement in an agreed-upon location in West Africa. But the organization's seemingly benign agenda was betrayed by its racism. Henry Clay, an outspoken proponent of the ACS's agenda, figured the only real solution was to "drain" the free black populations from the United States as there seemed for him no other way to resolve growing racial tensions between North American free blacks and whites. The unacknowledged thinking behind this position was that the United States was essentially a white man's country where whites were the sole beneficiaries of its progressive politics. Free blacks, by contrast, had little if no place in a progressive political context endorsed and promoted by slaveholding interests.

The turn-of-the-century founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard Allen, stands in as the voice for a growing opposition to the ACS's project. By the late 1820s, Allen achieved considerable notoriety as the founder of the first majority black denomination in North America. In a letter submitted to the milestone African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, Allen voiced the growing discontent in black communities with this agenda. The letter reads as an articulation and defense of an emergent, distinctly African American collective identity. He writes,

We [the blacks] were stolen from our mother country, and brought here. We have tilled the ground and made fortunes for thousands, and still they are not weary of our services. But they who stay to till the ground must be slaves. Is there not land enough in America, or "corn enough in Egypt?" See the thousands of foreigners emigrating to America every year: and if there be ground sufficient for them to cultivate, and bread for them to eat, why would they wish to send the first tillers of the land away? Africans have made fortunes for thousands, who are yet unwilling to part with their services; but the free must be sent away, and those who remain must be slaves. I have no doubt that there are many good men who do not see as I do, and who are

for sending us to Liberia; but they have not duly considered the subject – they are not men of colour. – This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free.²

In a subtle yet brilliant move, Allen exploits the issue of racial slavery as a way of justifying free black presence in the United States. Behind Allen's remarks is the sense of what blacks deserve as just recompense for their perpetual toil. Allen suggests that blacks, by virtue of tilling the soil, have curiously developed a sense of common cause with the land of their affliction, which could not be easily removed by resettlement to Africa or anywhere else. As the enslaved tillers of the soil, blacks are bound up with the successes or failures of American political destiny. David Walker, whose writings and activism helped to radicalize the abolition movement in the USA and would inspire a generation of black writers, quotes Allen's letter in his seminal work *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) in order to further make the case for black unity and resistance.

Blacks found themselves in dire circumstances and facing an uncertain future in an early era of political promise. Confronting the prospect of the slaveholder's whip in the Southern States and constant racial harassment by whites in the North, free black communities (living in the early nineteenth-century urban centers of Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston) were keenly aware of greater albeit grim truths: first, that in spite of growing sectional differences between the North and the South, slavery had become a pervasive reality in American political economy as a whole, and secondly, that the political freedoms of Northern blacks were for all intents and purposes a mere formality. Blacks, whether slave or free, were living in the long shadow of a slaveholding democracy.

In the face of this, black writers sought to craft a radical democratic vision that would, by implication, call into question the limits of the American political experiment, itself in the process of evolving in the decades following the American Revolution. This multivalent effort expressed itself across a variety of literary genres, ranging from polemic and pamphlets to poetry and, of course, slave and conversion narratives. Expressing a new vision for empowerment, these writers broke new ground in an ever-expanding discourse on political and social equality in the North American context. African American women writers faced added challenges as they sought to contest stalwart forms of gender exclusion through imagining both the domestic space and the public platform as places for self-empowerment, authority,

and revolutionary transformation. Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart, Zilpha Elaw, and others employed religious oratory as a way of imagining the equality of black women at the very center of an ongoing struggle for black emancipation. Their writings sought to challenge racist and sexist/patriarchal forms of power, which continued to render US democratic practices a relatively narrow affair in political/social exclusion.

Both African American women and men writers employed the project of black resistance and reform as an occasion to explore the violence of the plantation regime and nineteenth-century racial slavery; articulate possibilities for black emancipation and resistance; highlight the struggle for New World literacy; chronicle the translation of African identities into New World identities; enlarge and enrich an ongoing public conversation on women's rights and equality; and emphasize a precolonial African past as a way of bolstering a nascent radical black consciousness against the tide of white supremacist ideology. Perspectives on black freedom, equality, and humanity also range on the ideological spectrum from outright complicity with slavery to calls for radical resistance. The challenge was realizing a tradition in writing and thought in the face of real ethnic, regional, and legal distinctions that continued to fragment African American identity and frustrate possibilities for collective resistance. And then there was the problem of white racism. As historian Michael A. Gomez suggests, black Americans, as late as the 1790s, struggled to imagine a shared racial heritage and political community both within the larger context of turn-of-the-century emergent white racial hegemony and as a contrast to a complex (and oftentimes sutured) form of intraracial identity.³ Walker summed up the situation for free and enslaved American black communities in his incendiary 1829 address given before the Massachusetts General Coloured Association. He writes,

Now, that we [the blacks] are disunited, is a fact, that no one of common sense will deny; and, that the cause of which, is a powerful auxiliary in keeping us from rising to the scale of reasonable thinking beings, none but those who delight in our degradation will attempt to contradict. Did I say those who delight in our degradation? Yea, sir glory in keeping us ignorant and miserable, that we might be the better and longer slaves.⁴

Walker here makes no distinction in terms of region or legal status. Blacks, as he imagines the case to be, suffer together under a stalwart form of racial oppression. Maria W. Stewart – Walker's intellectual protégée, an early contender in the struggle for women's rights, and a founding figure in nineteenth-century African American political thought – further elaborates

these concerns. In a "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," she asks, "Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die. If we sit here, we shall die. Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live – and if they kill us, we shall but die."⁵ Stewart here coaxes her black sisters and brothers toward action against what she viewed as African American political and social apathy.

Walker and his peers had a fairly extensive tradition in African Atlantic writing from which to model forms of written expression. The process of crafting a North American black writing tradition in the two decades following the American Revolution was by no means smooth and was at points contradictory. These forms, however, were necessarily for setting a new cultural basis for writing and thought. Henry Louis Gates has famously argued that the early writers of the African Atlantic were attempting to write themselves (and a culture) into being in a literate, public Atlantic context where proslavery and antislavery sensibilities competed for moral and political influence.⁶ This is important given the political stakes. The Age of Revolution's radical postures on liberty and equality built upon sensibilities inherited from the Enlightenment. Proponents of the Enlightenment advanced that equality and a shared humanity, individual and political agency, rested upon the individual's capacity for reason. The visible sign for rational capability, they counseled, was in the individual's capacity for writing. In turn, proslavery proponents insisted that the racial enslavement of Africans was in a sense just, as African peoples are an inferior species and are thus ill-suited for freedom. If black writers could demonstrate, in a fairly sophisticated way, their capacity for literary expression, then they verified black humanity and equality and exposed proslavery arguments as spurious and unjust.

The religious symbolism drawn from Judeo-Christian theology provides a crucial framework for early black writers to convey the tragedies and triumphs of black life and survival in a strange land. Joanna Brooks has argued that the themes of religious conversion and the religious experience furnish black literary production with a discursive basis for crafting a distinctive rhetoric.⁷ The process of spiritual death, religious redemption, and rebirth, she contends, functions as a powerful surrogate and compelling metaphor as black writers attempt to capture the ambiguities and paradox that was black life in an Atlantic slaveholding period. The rise of religious itinerancy under Methodist and New Light Baptist movements in the middle years of the eighteenth century proved to be a powerful draw. The religious dynamism of worship in these movements forged spiritual communities that would cut

across race, class, and gender lines. It would not be long before black writers saw in these vernacular forms the prospects for black equality and freedom. The larger themes of spiritual regeneration and renewal combine powerfully with an antislavery agenda to produce some of the more eloquent denunciations of the slave regime.

The Atlantic crises of racial enslavement and oppression fostered a transnational context for critical debate and exchange in the late eighteenth century, and North American black writers were certainly caught in the sweep of its influence. There were glimmerings of a distinctly African American literary expression as early as the 1770s in the work of the poet Phillis Wheatley (1753–84), an African-born slave writing in Boston, Massachusetts during the years prior to the American War of Independence. Her poems “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and “To His Excellency General Washington” gesture toward the foundations of a distinctly North American literary sensibility. But even her work in the years leading up to the antislavery campaigns would grow to assume Atlantic importance as her neoclassical elegiac and shorter poems become a significant test case for gauging the rational capacities of Africans in Britain, the Caribbean, and the newly established United States.⁸ The effects of an older Hanoverian British political strength and commercial coherence lingered in the form of a hemispheric sensibility in black literatures – up through the conversion narrative of John Jea (1745–1829), *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, The African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (1815). The consequence would be that many authors we now celebrate as founding figures in the African American literary tradition could claim an Atlantic world citizenship. Their written expressions of emergent black life and humanity in the Atlantic stretched beyond national and/or geographic boundaries.

The shift in political perspective during the 1820s was marked by a concerted attempt to more firmly ground black experience in the political and ideological currencies of a fledgling United States. Yet, the writings of the eighteenth-century African Atlantic set important precedents for African American writing in the early nineteenth century. Walker’s indictments of Thomas Jefferson’s racist hypotheses of Negro inferiority in his foundational work *Appeal* are anticipated by more than a quarter of a century by Benjamin Banneker’s letters, which challenge directly Jefferson’s ambivalent views on blacks. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787) by Ottobah Cugoana (1757–1803) inaugurates the political sermon/essay to which both Walker and the nineteenth-century political writer Maria W. Stewart offer significant

contributions. The rhetoric of racial redemption to be found in the work of Robert Alexander Young, Walker, and Stewart had been anticipated by the charges and sermons of Prince Hall and John Marrant, as these figures were instrumental in the founding of a distinctly African Masonic brotherhood in the final decade of the eighteenth century. Olaudah Equiano popularizes the slave narrative genre which, in turn, becomes a staple for the antislavery campaign well into the nineteenth century. And John Jea's conversion narrative serves as an important (if only indirect) precursor to the innovative spiritual autobiographies produced by Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Rebecca Cox Jackson in the 1830s and onward.

The stress placed upon racial redemption, solidarity, and uplift in the 1820s evolves to become a controlling metaphor in the years after Vesey's conspiracy. Ironically enough, these themes drew inspiration from a relatively obscure biblical verse (Proverbs 68:31) that prophesies the eventual spiritual redemption of Africans – or “Ethiopians” as the verse refers to African peoples. The idea that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands toward God” had become a popular turn of phrase in the political discourses of the period – finding its expression, in one form or another, in the writings of Walker, Stewart, and Young. Young had been an early proponent of political Ethiopianism. Little is known of his life, except that he may have been “a working class preacher of mixed-racial heritage who plied his trade on the streets of New York City.”⁹ A self-published pamphlet in mystical messianism, Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* (1829) infuses a natural rights discourse inherited from the Enlightenment with prophetic ruminations to foresee the eventual global liberation of Ethiopians at some divinely appointed time in the future. Young writes,

Ah! doth your expanding judgement, base slaveholder, not from here descry that the shackles which have been by you so undeservingly forged upon a wretched Ethiopian's frame, are about to be forever from him unlinked. Say ye, this can never be accomplished? If so, must indeed the power and decrees of Infinity become subservient to the will of depraved man. But learn, slaveholder, thine will rests not in thine hand: God decrees to thy slave his rights as man.¹⁰

Young does little to outline how the eventual liberation of blacks would be achieved, except by way of admonishing his black brethren to wait on the hand of God. His work, however, is an important ideological precursor to the more explicit Black Nationalist rhetoric of the period. Young's pamphlet also bridges the historical cleft between the more popular writings of Prince Hall

and those of David Walker. In his 1797 *Charge* to his Masonic brethren, Hall exclaims,

My brethren, let us not be cast down under these and many other abuses we at present labour under: for the darkest is before the break of day: My brethren, let us remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren six year ago, in the French West Indies. Nothing but the snap of the whip was heard from morning to evening; hanging, broken on the wheel, burning, and all manner of tortures inflicted on those unhappy people, for nothing else but to gratify their masters pride, wantonness and cruelty: but blessed be God the scene is changed; they now confess that God hath no respect of persons, and therefore receive them as their friends, and treat them as brothers. Thus doth Ethiopia begin to stretch forth her hand, from a sink of slavery to freedom and equality.¹¹

Young's and Hall's language shares at least the common theme of racial redemption. Walker may very well have been aware of Young's pamphlet while composing his own *Appeal*, which was published the same year, 1829.

This early period in the nineteenth century witnessed the return of published poetic expression within the varieties of African American literature. George Moses Horton was a prolific writer whose poetry would touch a variety of subjects ranging from the mundane experiences of life and maturity to racial slavery and its evils. Not since Phillis Wheatley had an African American poet garnered so much attention from abolitionists and proslavery proponents alike. Horton saw himself as part of an emergent tradition in American literary expression. However, he lamented his underdevelopment as a poet given his status as a slave. Born in Northampton County, North Carolina c.1797, George Moses Horton remained a slave from his birth to the close of the Civil War. His condition as a slave would both prohibit and make possible his productivity. Joan Sherman states that "Horton was the first American slave to protest his bondage in verse; the first African American to publish a book in the South; the only slave to earn a significant income by selling his poems; the only poet of any race to produce a book of poems *before* he could write; and the only slave to publish two volumes of poetry while in bondage and another shortly after emancipation."¹²

Little is known of Horton's life outside of "his autobiographical sketch in his second volume of poems, *The Poetical Works* (1845), a few of his letters, one long oration, and brief reminiscences by men who actually met him."¹³ But readers certainly get a sense of his deep anguish as a poet struggling to overcome the bondage of slavery. The first stanza of his intensely personal poem "George Moses Horton, Myself," published in his third volume of

poetry, *Naked Genius* (1865), offers the portrait of a man denied the full potential of life and creativity. He writes, "I feel myself in need/Of the inspiring strains of ancient lore,/My heart to lift, my empty mind to feed,/And all the world explore."¹⁴ In this poem, he compares his poetic gifts to "a restless bird" whose creativity wishes to spread its wings and power and "dart from world to world."

Horton's poems draw inspiration from an impressive array in Western canonical writing, ranging from the work of Homer to Milton, Shakespeare, and Byron. He became familiar with canonical Western literature as partial compensation for the love poems and acrostics he composed for students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Interestingly, Horton would develop relatively late both as an antislavery writer and as a strong voice of early black protest, although the theme of slavery certainly appears in his early work, *The Hope of Liberty* (1829). In characteristic autobiographical fashion, Horton expresses his misery at being held in bondage in poems such as "The Slave's Complaint" and "On Liberty and Slavery." In the eighth stanza of "On Liberty and Slavery," the poet expresses his wish to dispense with slavery and its withering effects that seem to hold him in perpetual thrall. In this stanza Horton writes, "But Slavery hide her haggard face,/And barbarism fly:/I scorn to see the sad disgrace/In which enslaved I lie,"¹⁵ which seems to compare the poet's enslavement to a lasting death. Horton's poem "Division of an Estate," published in *The Poetical Works* is also worth mentioning for its subtle yet apocalyptic portrayal of the end of plantation life and its cataclysmic aftermath.

The year 1829 represents a monumental shift in the political discourse of racial solidarity and uplift. David Walker's *Appeal to the COLOURED CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, but in particular and very expressly, to those of THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA* is no less than a signal achievement in early African American literature and political thought. Born free in Wilmington, North Carolina around 1796–97, Walker finds his way to Boston, Massachusetts where he discovers many of the same forms of racial harassment he encountered as a child. He is impressed, however, with black reform movements in cities like Boston, which were the direct result of black Freemason antislavery resistance and the black church. In his "Address, Delivered before the General Colored Association at Boston, by David Walker," he attempts to coax his audience toward action and collective resistance by asking rhetorically, "Shall we keep slumbering on, with our arms completely folded up, exclaiming every now and then, against our miseries, yet never do the least thing to ameliorate our condition or that of posterity? ... Ought we not to form

ourselves into a general body, to protect, aid, and assist each other to the utmost of our power, with the beforementioned restrictions?"¹⁶ As a religious man and a Freemason, Walker shared with Prince Hall a sense of urgency concerning the need for black solidarity and community.

The *Appeal* may be classified as a political sermon, and in this sense it belongs to the American jeremiad tradition going as far back as seventeenth-century New England. The *Appeal* would have an enormous impact on the growing strength of the abolitionist movement in the USA and would bring into focus for slaveholding whites the potential for rebellion. After the publication of the *Appeal*, both blacks and sympathetic whites were more willing to adopt an "immediatist" posture calling for the immediate end to slaveholding in the United States. Prominent antislavery agitators such as William Lloyd Garrison found much to admire in Walker's unflinching stance. On the other hand, "gradualists" such as the abolitionist Benjamin Lundy condemned Walker's pamphlet for its incendiary language. At points it is as if Walker comes close to suggesting the possibility of collective violent black revolt. He remarks "that there is an unconquerable disposition in the breasts of the blacks, which, when it is fully awakened and put into motion, will be subdued, only with the destruction of the animal existence. Get the blacks started, and if you do not have a gang of tigers and lions to deal with, I am a deceiver of the blacks and of the whites."¹⁷ This language, scholars have noted, would also serve as an ideological precursor to Black Nationalist resistance. Sterling Stuckey and others have tended to emphasize this dimension, Stuckey himself arguing that the work "contains the most all-embracing black nationalist formulation to appear in America during the nineteenth century."¹⁸ In his introduction to Walker's work, historian Sean Wilentz writes that the *Appeal* had once been a "dangerous pamphlet." Indeed, Walker's work caused at least two Southern states to enact harsher laws restricting "black literacy, including a ban on the distribution of antislavery literature."¹⁹

The *Appeal*, however, is also a meditation on the politico-theological sources of the American white supremacy. Walker argued "Christian Americans" (and for Walker this means white Christian Americans) had come to falsely believe "that Heaven [had] designed [blacks] and [their children] to be slaves and *beasts of burden* to them and their children" forever.²⁰ Elsewhere he states that Christian Americans had come to falsely believe that Heaven had designated blacks as an "inheritance to them and their children."²¹ What appears as a transcending truth in North American political consciousness could serve as a bedrock for distinctly modern forms of tyranny. This

myth of racial inheritance for Walker threatened to hold the whole of North American political reason in thrall. For him, Thomas Jefferson's racist hypotheses on Negro inferiority were an especially tragic manifestation of this prevailing problem in modern reason and power. Jefferson had thought it unfortunate that the "Creator" would make blacks black. Walker writes that "This is a fair illustration of the state of society in this country – it shows what a bearing *avarice* has upon a people, when they are nearly given up the Lord to a hard heart and a reprobate mind, in consequence of afflicting their fellow creatures." He prophesies that "God suffers some to go on until they are ruined forever!!!! Will it be the case with the whites of the United States of America?"²² Like Young, Walker offered only a vague sense of what form God's retributive justice might take in restoring blacks to their former equality.

The *Appeal* also functions as a powerful and sustained rebuttal to Thomas Jefferson's racist hypotheses on Negro inferiority. In fact, the work is structured as a declaration of independence with four articles and a preamble. This structure is intended to mirror and highlight the failures of America's two most sacred political documents, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson and his cohorts decry a train of abuses, which, they suggest, the British crown had heaped upon property-owning white men in the North American colonies. Jefferson and his co-authors compare these abuses to a form of political slavery. Walker exploits and inverts this revolutionary language through showing how American tyrants have heaped a train of abuses on slave and free black populations. At the end of the *Appeal*, Walker quotes the Declaration of Independence and admonishes the Christian Americans "to hear [their] language further," lest there be a second American Revolution. Walker's untimely death in 1830 ensured that his thinking would have foundational but limited scope in its capacity to answer how blacks emerge out of what he referred to as "wretchedness" under the yoke of racial slavery. There were others, however, who were willing to take up the calling and mission of community reform and uplift.

The period immediately after Walker's death saw a substantial transformation in the role that African American women played on the public stage. During this era, religion and religiosity exerted a powerful influence on the rhetoric of race and gender equality in African American writing. African American women would make full use of the religious sensibility to advance the cause of rights for both women and blacks. But there were obstacles. As scholars of nineteenth-century African American women's writing note,

women were subject to a “domestic double standard.”²³ The proper role for women, it was thought, was in the “private sphere” of the household, away from public political centers of reason, revolution, and reform, traditionally understood as a man’s domain. This holds especially true for the role of women in the black church, as the pulpit represented one of the few viable spaces for political and cultural authority within various North American black communities during the era. Women were to be seen and not heard. And even when seen, there was always the perverse potential for sexualizing the black woman’s body (and by implication presence), trivializing that body into a mere object of desire. There was also the potential for reading women’s public presence as masculine, simply for engaging in activities deemed by more conservative audiences as “improper” or “unseemly.” The challenge, then, for African American women at this point would be to imagine writing both as an instrument for women’s self-empowerment and as a declaration of sexual liberty from raced and gendered forms of terror and tyranny. For would-be public orators, this meant oftentimes a slow (and painful) transition from private calling to public mission. One strategy, Carla L. Peterson suggests, would be for these women to imagine literary representation as a form of “self-marginalization,” which in turn would allow the autobiographer and orator to employ writing as a way of temporarily suspending a traditional configuration in politics and power.²⁴

Maria W. Stewart’s work, in this way, sets an important precedent. Soon after Walker’s death, Maria Stewart began her career as a public orator, publishing her political essays in William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*, under the publisher’s designation “Ladies Department.” Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803 and orphaned at the age of five, Stewart, by her own account, was “bound out in a clergyman’s family,” where she remained until the age of fifteen.²⁵ Stewart learned much from Walker, and she had been Walker’s intellectual protégée. After the death of her husband, James W. Stewart, she would turn to religion as a source of meaning and comfort for what had thus far been her tragic life. Shortly before her death in 1879, Stewart reprinted her political writings together with a brief autobiographical preface, prayers, and spiritual musings in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1832). Garrison and the Episcopalian minister/political activist Alexander Crummell were impressed with her command of rhetoric. Garrison had long recognized Stewart’s gifts for speechmaking. Indeed, Stewart seemed to have a knack for combining religious oratory with a political and social vision. Garrison characterized her as a woman of immense “talent” and “piety.”

As Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and others sought to do in the years following her brief political career, Stewart employs the authority of the Bible as a way of establishing her place as a speaker and activist in the political sphere. In her "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," she writes "Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation – 'Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply – 'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!'"²⁶ Employing the rhetorical structure derived from the Old Testament prophets, she imagines her calling as a responsibility to be involved publicly in the advancement of oppressed black people. As Peterson suggests, Stewart's challenge was to translate an intensely personal calling and relationship with God (as expressed in her recorded prayers and meditation) into political and social involvement.²⁷

Stewart's major concern in her early political writings and essays is with the fate of blacks in a slaveholding political context. Her political writings would offer some of the earliest insights to be produced by African American writers on slavery and its relationship to the fate of the American Republic. In her essays and speeches, Stewart adapted Walker's revolutionary postures to her abiding interests in religious and moral discipline and its role in political life. If Walker stands as the founding father in a tradition of black revolutionary political ethics, Stewart is most certainly its founding mother. She argued for the recuperation of moral and political virtue in blacks. A woman of deep religious commitment, she grounded her analyses of American political formation in an extended discussion on moral and political virtue and their relationship to the various dimensions of American progress. Over the span of her essays, she contends that if blacks were encouraged to pursue virtue (excellence) and promote it among themselves, this would surely translate into a form of revolutionary courage that might eventually transform the American political terrain.

Stewart also espoused an Ethiopianist vision first articulated by eighteenth-century writers like Prince Hall. She too believed that Psalms 68:31 promised eventual redemption and uplift for blacks. Stewart insisted that the proper bases for any ethical polity rested with society's dual commitment to the pursuit of virtue (excellence) and education, and that this virtual absence of this dual commitment in black communities was the major reason why blacks languished under the double yoke of slavery and second-class status. In a shorter piece, entitled "Cause for Encouragement," she states that the "greatest and most powerful men since the foundations of the earth" were those who had been the most "eminent for their piety and virtue."²⁸ Stewart argues

that the successes of the American Revolution and democracy were the direct result of whites having had a long history of pursuing excellence in moral and political improvement. In her first essay, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," she refers to this as the practice of "headwork." She counsels her fellow blacks to "imitate" the whites' example.

The major obstacle preventing blacks from achieving this, she suggests, is the history of racial enslavement in the United States. Stewart writes that "the Americans [whites] have practised nothing but head-work these 200 years, and we have done their drudgery."²⁹ In "An Address Delivered at the Masonic Hall," she argued that the consequence of this disparity is that all has "been owned by the lordly white"³⁰ – in essence, ceding the bulk of political power and authority to whites. She believed women had a significant hand in reversing a contemptible state of affairs. Stewart writes, "O woman, woman would thou only strive to excel in merit and virtue; would thou only store thy mind with useful knowledge, great would be thine influence."³¹ If black women and men both pursued virtue and education, the "chains of ignorance and slavery," she insists, would "melt like wax before the flames." Investigations like the ones Stewart pursued in her essays and speeches set the basis for mid-nineteenth-century black abolitionist and feminist critiques of racial slavery.

Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831) set another precedent. Prince's *History* is significant as a founding text in the canons of African Atlantic writing in English. In the 1830s, the slave narrative tradition would again transform and evolve through a story related by an Afro-Caribbean woman. Mary Prince's work was the first narrative on the life of a black woman slave to be published in England.³² The narrative chronicles in lurid detail the life and experiences of black women subjected to the brutality of the slave regime. The work was groundbreaking in the way that it sought to highlight the sexual as well as racial dynamics of slaveholding violence. Born in Brackish Pond, Bermuda in 1788, Prince describes the sexual indiscretions, sadism, and unrelenting violence of her various masters. If she had been subjected to brutal forms of laboring toil in one instance, she most assuredly was being raped by at least one of her masters in other instances. Indeed, she recounts an especially suggestive moment when her violent former master, Mr. D—, strips off his clothes and instructs her to bathe him. Prince remarks that "This was worse to me than all the licks [beatings]"³³ she had received from him previously. The sexual violence of the scene is palpable but only hinted at. Protecting would-be squeamish readers from the

overly sordid details of slaveholding violence, the text has a seductive quality as it seeks to maintain its rhetorical strength through what it chooses to withhold as well as disclose.

Prince had been able to leave her circumstance as a slave only by chance when she decided to accompany her final owners, the Woods, to England in hopes of finding a cure for her rheumatism.³⁴ After having been turned out of doors by the Woods, she eventually found her way to the Anti-Slavery Society in Aldermanbury, East London (then the central office of the British antislavery campaign) to solicit the help of the British abolitionists in an attempt to buy her freedom from her owners. Thomas Pringle (secretary for the Anti-Slavery Society and future editor of the *History*) took up Prince's cause and appealed to Mr. Wood to sell her. Wood's refusal to sell Prince led to a very public and nasty battle over the right to Prince's body. As the Supplement to the *History* suggests, Prince would again be made an object and commodity as proslavery and antislavery forces contended for her fate as either a slave or a free woman.

The fact that the *History* is "related" and not written by Prince gives the narrative a paradoxically simple yet murky rhetorical quality, where the voice of the narrator is subject to (and at times appropriated by) the editor's control. While Pringle promised to "[retain] as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology,"³⁵ readers may ask whose voice they hear in the text. Is it Prince's voice that engages reading audiences? Or is the voice a collaboration among Pringle, Prince, and Susanna Strickland (the woman to whom Prince dictates the biography of her life)? Add to this, the strong – and at times overpowering – presence of the editor in the work: taken together, Pringle's Preface and Supplement are as long (if not longer) than the narrative itself. In this way, the narrative's rhetoric is at times made to compete and contend with an intrusive abolitionist voice for the attention of readers. As Sarah Salih suggests in her introduction, Prince's *History* "is not a straightforward autobiography, but a collection of texts."³⁶ In an important sense, the *History* anticipates what would become a protracted struggle between white abolitionist editors and black writers over voice and authority in nineteenth-century African American antislavery texts.

Barbara Baumgartner notes that the emphasis the narrative places on Prince's bodily pain functions as both a site of resistance and antislavery propaganda.³⁷ Indeed, Prince's constant emphasis on pain and weakness in her body functions as an indirect critique of slaveholding excesses. In stark contrast to the black antislavery polemic inaugurated decades earlier by her African British predecessor Ottobah Cugoana, Prince would position

rhetorically her body as its own source of knowledge and “truth” concerning slavery. The author states,

Oh the horrors of slavery! How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free.³⁸

For Prince, slavery represents more than an unjust practice which may be conceived in abstract terms. Rather, her “knowledge” concerning slavery may be derived directly from the violence she endures and the pain to which she is subjected.

Stewart, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Rebecca Jackson worked out new strategies for self-empowerment and imagined new possibilities for women in religious authority through radical reinterpretations of scripture. They felt their calling to preach as strongly as their male counterparts. Their uses of literacy built on those to be found in spiritual autobiographies like the 1815 publication of *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, The African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself*. Jea anticipates their reliance on the Word as an authority when he states that an angel of God miraculously teaches him to read the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Jea recounts that “From that hour, in which the Lord taught me to read, until the present, I have not been able to read in any book, nor any reading whatever, but such as contain the word of God.”³⁹ As “humble instruments” and “handmaidens” of God, these women preached to “promiscuous audiences” (meaning audiences comprised of various folk), and would use their status as itinerant ministers to extend the authority of the Word beyond institutionalized spaces. For these writers, the Word provided a gender-inclusive and race-blind challenge to institutionalized forms of power which had been traditionally encoded as white and masculine. Through adapting the prophetic voice of the Bible to their contemporary historical moment and through unearthing the gender inclusive implications behind a redemptive Christian vision, they charted a new course for spiritual/political agency and freedom.

Jarena Lee’s *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady* (1836) and its expanded version, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* (1849), signal an initial attempt at rethinking the genre of spiritual autobiography from a black woman’s perspective, and in this sense set yet another precedent in the varieties of African American writing during the

period. William L. Andrews states that "Lee's autobiography offers us the earliest and most detailed information we have about the traditional roles of women in organized black religious life in the United States and about the ways in which resistance to those roles began to manifest itself."⁴⁰ Born free in Cape May, New Jersey in 1783, she narrativizes her struggles both with the Methodists and with herself to finally heed her spiritual call. Similar to Elaw's and Jackson's autobiographies, Lee's call to preach appears to have grown out of an extended period in her religious rebirth and maturity. Andrews explains that this process was represented in stages in African American women's spiritual autobiography. He writes that "The stages of salvation that [these writers] recount ... are: first, repentance as a result of the conviction of one's sinfulness; second, justification from the guilt of sin by Christ's atonement and forgiveness; and third, sanctification, or a 'new birth,' free from the power of sin by virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit."⁴¹ Rather than a kind of moral and spiritual perfection as conversion, the process of salvation, justification, and sanctification provided for these writers a new motive for living and doing. In turn, their activities would in some way evidence a life transformed. Lee would have a series of visions and fall into a debilitating illness before she resolved to preach. After having finally settled on matters of faith and conversion, Lee in particular acknowledged her call and asked Richard Allen (the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) if she might preach as a Methodist minister. Allen was no schismatic in matters of Methodist doctrine and gently refused her request. Carla Peterson suggests that Lee turned to literary composition as a way of cultivating a more favorable "public" language that might lend her preaching credibility in the eyes of institutionalized religion. This strategy was not successful as the AME Church refused to finance an 1845 publication, regarding both her visions and her emphasis on religious ecstasy in the work as "impossible to decipher."⁴²

Some years later, Lee stood up in the middle of one of Allen's services and began to "exhort" the Gospel, expanding on a sermon given that day by a Revd. Richard Williams. Allen finally acknowledged her calling, and commissioned her as an "exhorter," which was a subordinate position in the ministerial pecking order of the Methodist Church. Lee remained undaunted and eventually began an itinerant preaching career that took her through a number of Middle Atlantic and Northeastern states and as far west as Dayton, Ohio. After some resistance from male clergy, her sermons gained a wide acceptance among Methodist congregations. Her sermons were a powerful draw even for slaveholders. She writes,

At the first meeting which I held at my uncle's house, there was, with others who had come from curiosity to hear the coloured women preacher; an old man, was a deist, and who said he did not believe the coloured people had any souls – he was sure they had none. He took a seat very near where I was standing, and boldly tried to look me out of countenance. But as I laboured on in the best manner I was able, looking to God all the while, though it seemed to me I had but little liberty, yet there went an arrow from the bent bow of the gospel, and fastened in his till then obdurate heart. After I had done speaking, he went out, and called the people around him, said that my preaching might seem a small thing, yet he believed I had the worth of souls at heart ... This man was a great slave holder, and had been very cruel; thinking nothing of knocking down a slave with a fence stake, or whatever might come to hand. From this time it was said of him that he became greatly altered in his ways for the better.⁴³

Preferring to view her audiences as the “fallen sons and daughters of Adam’s race,”⁴⁴ Lee refused to cower in the face of difference. Her call to preach the Gospel was for anyone who was willing to listen. For her the Word offered a revisionist agenda which included women at the center of public authority in communities of faith. She writes,

If a man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear ... To this it may be replied, by those who are determined not to believe that it is right for a woman to preach, that the disciples, though they were fishermen, and ignorant of letters too, were inspired so to do ... May he not, did he not, and can he not inspire a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and accompany it too, with power to the sinner’s heart. As for me, I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labour according to what I have received, in his vineyard. If he has not, how could he consistently bear testimony in favour of my poor labours, in awakening and converting sinners?⁴⁵

Lee’s interpretation of the Word understands preaching as an enterprise which cannot be limited merely to spaces of institutional authority. For Lee, neither training nor one’s status as male is an absolute prerequisite for preaching. The call is a gift afforded to anyone (regardless of gender) who has experienced spiritual regeneration and rebirth in Jesus Christ. Her strong denunciation of sexism in the politico-religious sphere would set the precedent for the more detailed account of gender-exclusion found in Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs*.

The Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw (1846) is a fascinating account of Zilpha Elaw’s call to preach. Elaw

appears to be somewhat of an Atlantic figure, as she chronicles her struggles to gain public acceptance in the religious spheres of both Britain and the United States. Like Lee before, Elaw's visions, religious ecstasy, spiritual disappointment, and triumph worked as peaks and valleys in a lifelong struggle to realize a call. Also like Lee, she would pursue her calling in spite of constant bodily pain. Despite weakness and bodily inflammation, Elaw managed to preach thousands of sermons to congregants in Philadelphia, Annapolis and other parts of the South, New York, and various parts of England. Peterson describes Lee's (and by implication, Elaw's) efforts as an attempt to transform a body in pain into a bodiless voice of power.⁴⁶ Born around 1790 to free parents in the vicinity of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Elaw met opposition to her preaching and spirituality both from her nominally Christian husband, Joseph Elaw, and from various hearing audiences. After Joseph Elaw died of consumption in 1840, and given her dire financial circumstances, she was forced to put herself and her daughter into domestic service. Elaw, however, was undaunted. She was firmly convinced that her soul was sanctified by God at an 1817 camp meeting, and upon the encouragement of her sister and other women who knew her, continued to pursue her spiritual mission.⁴⁷ She even preached with Lee in western Pennsylvania for a period of time.

Elaw's *Memoirs* is an admixture of religious reflection and autobiographical account. Readers may hear the cadences of a preacherly rhetoric in her work. Like Lee, Stewart, and Jackson, she borrows heavily from the rhetorical structure found in the prophetic books of the Old Testament and Paul's epistles. Indeed, the "Dedication" in Elaw's *Memoirs* is fashioned as a Pauline epistle of sorts, admonishing her British brethren to "Cautiously, diligently, and habitually observe and obey the directions and statutes of Christ and his apostles, that your foundation may be built not upon the sand of current traditions and prejudices, but upon the prophets and apostles, Christ Jesus being the chief cornerstone [Ephesians 2:20], and that you may become His true and finished disciples, perfect and entire, lacking nothing, but complete in all the will of God."⁴⁸ Throughout the work, she subtly authorizes her call to preach in Britain through constant emphasis on her visions and the "voice" of a God that eventually led her across the waters of the Atlantic.

The work also has a comparative dimension. She contrasts the religiosity and morality of various populations of folk both in England and the USA through representing herself as an object of ridicule. This seems especially egregious in the account of her experiences in the slaveholding states. Elaw was gravely aware of her status as "coloured female preacher" in the slaveholding American South. She states that "I was sitting in a very conspicuous

situation near the door, and I observed, with very painful emotions, the crowd outside, pointing with their fingers pointing at me, and saying, 'that's her,' 'that's her;' for Satan strongly set before me the prospect of an immediate arrest and consignment by sale to some slave owner."⁴⁹ She overcomes her fears, as the voice of God encourages her to preach. The result is a rhetorical reversal of sorts, whereby the female coloured preacher is able to claim spiritual authority even over slaveholders. She writes,

There was some among the great folks whom curiosity induced to attend my ministry; and this formed a topic of lively interest with many of the slave holders, who thought it surpassingly strange that a person (and a female) belonging to the same family stock with their poor debased, uneducated, coloured slaves, should come into their territories and teach the enlightened proprietors the knowledge of God ... This was a paradox to them indeed ... and yet the power of truth and of God was never so manifest in any of their agencies, as with the dark coloured female stranger, who had come from afar to minister amongst them. But God had chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.⁵⁰

Here, Elaw imagines herself as an interloper (and something of usurper) in a stalwart configuration in power and reason. Elsewhere, she espouses a racial egalitarian stance and something of an Ethiopianist vision, as she subtly alludes to the eventual redemption of blacks by the hand of God. She writes, "The Almighty accounts not the black races of man either in the order of nature or spiritual capacity as inferior to the white; for He bestows his Holy Spirit on, and dwells in them as readily as in persons of whiter complexion: the Ethiopian eunuch [the eunuch the Apostle Phillip baptizes as recorded by the book of Acts] was adopted as a son and heir of God; and when Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto him [Ps. 68:31], their submission and worship will be graciously accepted."⁵¹

In addition to providing an even more expansive account of the gendered forms of exclusion that dominated the religious sphere, Elaw's *Memoirs* appears to be among some of the earliest sustained criticisms of Enlightenment skepticism to be offered by African American writers. The remarks here signal an interest in theological speculation. She notes,

[I]t is a fact worthy of extensive observation, that the vast variety of mental exercises and religious experience of all true and lively Christians, in every grade of society, in all ages, and in all denominations and sections of the Christian Church, are of too uniform and definite a character to be ascribed to the wild and fluctuating uncertainties of fanaticism ... and it may be retorted also, that stubborn facts continually prove, in other countries as well as in modern Gaul, that no fanaticism is more luxuriant, bewitching, and arrogant,

than that which inscribes on its ensign – “The Age of Reason,” and root itself in the soil of infidelity.⁵²

Mystics/slave autobiographers like Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871) would emerge in the crosshairs of this very important stage in critical intervention and creative expression. Born in 1795 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, little is known of her early life. Jean Humez states that

The autobiographical writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson ... are centrally concerned with how religious vision and ecstatic experiences functioned for her and other women of her time as a source of personal power, enabling them to make radical change in the outward circumstances of their lives ... Her religious experience was to propel her irreversibly out of her settled condition and into a forty-year public career, first as a preacher and later as the founder of a black Shaker community in her city.⁵³

Her journals and autobiography are fragmentary, but they do provide something of a metaphor for the struggles of African American women to authorize both themselves and their spiritual endeavors. In Jackson's spiritual submission to God, she expresses to readers throughout her work how she endeavored to claim “power” over her body; over her use of literacy; and ultimately over her self as a public religious authority. This seems to sum up what African American writers both preceding and following her wished to do.

These various writing traditions appearing in the 1820s and onward furnished a counterdiscursive basis for the rhetorical power found in Douglass's writings. In the 1852 speech commemorating the United States's seventy-sixth year of national independence from Britain, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass asks: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”⁵⁴ The question is intended as an indictment. Douglass had already gained a fair measure of notoriety with the 1845 publication of his autobiography, entitled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself*. The autobiography offered a damning critique of the plantation regime and American racial slavery. In his Fourth of July speech, he extends this critique, implying that whites were oblivious to what was a glaring contradiction in the progressive political conscience of a nation by the middle of the nineteenth century. The United States's original sin was the enslavement of countless numbers of Africans/blacks under what purported to be a democracy. Hence, Independence Day would have a contradictory legacy for American freedom and equality. For whites, the Fourth of July would represent the commemoration of freedom and independence from political enslavement under the British yoke. For blacks, it would be the first day in what was perpetual toil

under the yoke of white supremacy in a fledgling North American Republic. What better occasion was there to suggest failures in guaranteeing rights to all than on the annual commemoration of the nation's founding? The Declaration of Independence, the cornerstone of the radical American democratic experiment, did not equivocate in advancing "that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Douglass reminds his audience, however, that the "practical operation of this ... slave trade, the American slave trade [was being] sustained by American politics and religion."⁵⁵ Douglass's remarks, besides having the rhetorical capacity to strike at the very heart of American social and political hypocrisy, also hint at what were becoming the general contours of African American literary expression. It was the evolving paradox of radical democracy and radical enslavement and racial/gender oppression in the USA that would ironically give nineteenth-century African American literature its distinctive luster.

The rhetorical force and variety of early African American literature has a complex lineage. Douglass's sharp criticisms of the North American political situation represent a crescendo of sorts, building upon a watershed period of experience and insight in the evolution of early African Atlantic writing. If we are allowed to expand Douglass's rhetorical question a bit to suggest overarching concerns in the eighty or so years prior to his Fourth of July address, it might read thus: "what to blacks is your Atlantic revolutionary liberty and equality?" In his 1893 *Lecture on Haiti*, Douglass himself exclaims that "We should not forget that the freedom you and I enjoy to-day; that the freedom that eight hundred thousand colored people enjoy in the British West Indies; the freedom that has come to the colored race the world over, is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago. When they struck for freedom ... they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world."⁵⁶ And of course, there was the uniqueness of the American promise. For Douglass, the protocols of rhetoric and its distinct vision of freedom in African American literature drew much from the political turmoil that spanned from the time of the Saint Domingue Revolution to the Civil War. The radical American Revolutionary principles of equality and democracy would function as powerful inducements to the development of distinctly black American identities and literary sensibilities proceeding into the nineteenth century.

Notes

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27. Peterson, "Doers of the Word", pp. 57–63.
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African American literature and the abolitionist movement, 1845 to the Civil War

JOHN ERNEST

African American literature gained a major new writer in 1845 when Frederick Douglass published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. The book was published in Boston by the American Anti-Slavery Society and is perhaps the most significant example of the dynamic connection between the development of African American literature and the abolitionist movement. Douglass was, by this time, well known in antislavery circles. Having escaped from slavery in 1838, he had been working as a professional antislavery lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society since 1841. He wrote his *Narrative* both to document his own experiences within the system of slavery and to promote and extend his own efforts for the abolitionist cause. He was quite successful, and at some cost to his personal security. Indeed, owing to the publicity resulting from his detailed account of his life, he was forced to move to Great Britain to avoid being captured and returned to slavery. There he remained until 1847, following the purchase of his freedom by antislavery friends. Douglass's *Narrative*, in short, is not simply a particularly forceful example of the slave narrative genre but also a reminder that African American literature has often been produced at considerable risk to its authors.

Immediately celebrated as one of the most powerful narratives of its kind yet written, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was eventually recognized not only as the most influential of all slave narratives but also as a classic work of American literature. Following introductory testimonies and commentaries by white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, Douglass presents a story that extends from his earliest experiences – including his entrance through “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery” when he was first introduced to the physical cruelties common

under slavery – to his successful escape and his discovery of and initial participation in the antislavery movement. Douglass's *Narrative* was an immediate and unprecedented success, selling nearly 5,000 copies in its first four months. Within a few years, Douglass's book was translated into German, French, and Dutch, and "in six years a total of twenty-one editions of the book had been published in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe."¹ As David W. Blight has noted, "along with his public speeches, the *Narrative* made Frederick Douglass the most famous black person in the world."²

While the success of Douglass's *Narrative*, along with the developing fame of its author, helped to establish the value of autobiographical accounts of enslavement, Douglass was one of many African Americans who were inspired or prompted to tell of their experience with enslavement and self-liberation. Many of these stories were related orally – at antislavery meetings or in less formal conversations among activists – and many had been published in the antislavery press and in such important books as the white abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839), a book that had considerable influence on Douglass and many other abolitionist writers. After the success of Douglass's *Narrative*, many more book-length narratives were published in the last years of the 1840s, throughout the 1850s, and long after the Civil War. Some of these narratives were written by fugitive slaves who had succeeded, against all odds, in acquiring literacy; some were written by a white amanuensis – that is, someone trying to record a narrative faithfully related by the subject of the narrative. In a few famous cases, both fictional and actual narratives were written by white writers but presented as if written by the black subject of the narrative – and the controversy created by these cases led many in the antislavery movement to document carefully the authenticity of the narratives published, leading to sometimes extensive prefaces and appendices by white public figures in many narratives, Douglass's prominent among them. But the authority of Douglass's narrative helped to further an already established and rich history of autobiographical and biographical narratives placed in the service of the antislavery movement. Some of the authors of these narratives (or the sources for them, when the story was dictated to another) were directly connected to the movement – as was the case with Douglass's *Narrative* and also William Wells Brown's very successful *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), both of which were published by the American Anti-Slavery Society. But other narratives were published by the author, often with the support of antislavery sympathizers, but sometimes with the help of friends committed to the author but not

necessarily to the larger antislavery cause. Still others were taken up by booksellers and publishers associated with the antislavery cause as well as other reform movements – most prominently Bela Marsh and J. P. Jewett.

These narratives became increasingly popular, especially within the anti-slavery movement, but in spite of their growing influence African American male and female writers and narrators often found themselves working in a highly limited and restrictive public arena. With the publication of increasing numbers of narratives, and as these narratives were placed in the service of the abolitionist movement, many readers came to expect certain features – experiences, testimonies, and rhetorical gestures – when reading them. In practice, this meant that the narratives often followed familiar lines of development. Indeed, James Olney has argued that “the conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones.”³ Perhaps the most prominent features of this “master outline” were the prefaces or other testimonials written by white supporters or abolitionists assuring readers of the author’s or narrator’s veracity. But Olney’s outline includes other frequently repeated narrative features as well: accounts of physical abuse, commentary on the cruelty of “Christian” slaveholders, an episode concerning the acquisition of literacy, and a “description of the amounts of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year.”⁴ These narrative similarities, Olney argues, are to be expected in a genre of writings that developed within a reasonably well-defined and organized reform movement. “Unlike autobiography in general,” he explains, “the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, and have behind them and guiding them an organized group of ‘sponsors,’ and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audiences alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition. How, then, could the narratives be anything but very much like one another?”⁵

But not all slave narratives are alike, and even beyond those narrative features shared by many are significant differences of experience, geographical situation, public recognition (and its effects over time), and the dynamics of authorship (since some narratives were written or edited by white supporters). Indeed, taking in the larger picture of the many narratives of enslavement, escape, or emancipation published throughout the nineteenth century, one can see significant differences of narrative occasion, strategy, and purpose. The great majority of narratives are devoted to relatively obscure individuals – some written by the individuals themselves and some by white antislavery

sympathizers – and are designed simply to add additional evidence of the injustice of slavery and financial support for the narrative’s subject. Such narratives might emphasize the exotic appeal of the individual story – as is the case, for example, in Henry Trumbull’s *Life and Adventures of Robert Voorhis, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who has lived 14 Years in a Cave, secluded from human society* (1829), or Hiram Mattison’s *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861). Some narratives emerged directly from the author’s involvement in the antislavery movement. Douglass, for example, was so eloquent and assured on the antislavery lecture circuit that many in his audience doubted that he had been enslaved, and accordingly he wrote his narrative in part “to authenticate his antislavery speeches – and thus his voice.”⁶ Henry “Box” Brown, in contrast, began his career with a famous story to tell, having escaped from slavery by placing himself in a shipping crate which was then sent from Richmond, Virginia, to the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. When he acquired both his middle name and his fame soon after at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, he followed the experience quickly with the publication of the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide* (1849).

Douglass wrote his own narrative; Robert, Louisa Picquet, and Henry “Box” Brown relied on others to tell their stories – and one of the most challenging aspects of this important field of African American literature is that much of it was not written, in fact, by African Americans. While the category of slave narratives written by a white amanuensis includes a number of well-known narratives, scholars have sometimes been divided about how to approach these texts. Like Olney in his “master outline,” scholars commenting on slave narratives have tended to highlight the acquisition and the application of literacy as an essential part of the genre, thus emphasizing the importance of the phrase “written by himself” or “written by herself” attached to the title of many narratives. This excludes a great number of narratives, and fails to account for often significant white collaboration even in some narratives that claim self-authorship. As Sam Worley has observed, “this romantic model of writing and selfhood, which elegantly conflates self-expression, self-mastery, and self-advancement, typically takes Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* as the foremost representative of the genre.”⁷ Such approaches to slave narratives have led many to assume, Worley notes, that “those narratives which rely on a white amanuensis are inherently less interesting than those which do not. The argument ... is that however honorable his intentions, the amanuensis will inevitably shape the narrative to some extent,

thereby undermining its authenticity both as history and autobiography.”⁸ Certainly, the presence of a white narrator is problematic, given that even the most sincere of white narrators faced, as did African American writers, a determined struggle against the perspectives and assumptions promoted by a white supremacist culture. In fact, though, these narratives are both interesting and revealing, and often powerful, precisely because of the tensions they embody. Included in this category are narratives of some who became well known in antislavery circles – for example, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke* (1846), which was prepared with the help of Joseph Cammet Lovejoy. Notable, too, is a best-selling narrative of kidnapping, enslavement, and eventual release, *Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (1853), written by David Wilson. More notable still is *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself* (1849), written by Samuel A. Eliot, which quickly (and somewhat inaccurately) became known as the source for the character of Uncle Tom in white novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, one of the most famous and influential antislavery works ever published – leading to the publication of other versions of Henson’s story which emphasized his connection with Stowe and her novel.

As these and other narratives make clear, white antislavery sympathizers constituted the most significant audience for these tales of enslavement, and it is impossible to understand the prominence of this genre of writing without accounting for the interests and assumptions of white readers. Although slave narratives were widely circulated among African Americans, who often organized reading societies and libraries, the necessity of an alliance between black and white abolitionists, joined with the dominant presence of white abolitionists in antislavery organizations, made the slave narratives a genre of writing characterized by an ongoing struggle between black and white perspectives on a wide range of concerns including slavery, race, civil rights, and even the priorities of literary art. For the Reverend Ephraim Peabody, a white Unitarian minister of Boston, the slave narratives constituted “a new department of the literature of civilization.” Writing for the *Christian Examiner* in 1849, Peabody noted that “there are those who fear lest the elements of poetry and romance should fade out of the tame and monotonous social life of modern times.” But Peabody believed that “there is no danger of it while there are any slaves left to seek for freedom, and to tell the story of their efforts to obtain it.”⁹ The story that the formerly enslaved had to tell, Peabody argued, was one of universal value, reminding all readers that “there is that

in the lives of men who have sufficient force of mind and heart to enable them to struggle up from hopeless bondage to the position of freemen, beside which the ordinary characters of romance are dull and tame. They encounter a whole Iliad of woes, not in plundering and enslaving others, but in recovering for themselves those rights of which they have been deprived from birth." These were stories of human struggle, stories of enslavement that actually proved to be stories of the essential importance of freedom, and they were stories "calculated to exert a very wide influence on public opinion." They were also, of necessity, stories that "reveal incidentally," Peabody noted, "some of the necessary evils of this mournful institution" – that is, those evils encouraged, perpetuated, and rationalized by those whose interest it was to maintain the system of slavery.¹⁰

Other white commentators on these narratives agreed. In his introduction to another well-known story of enslavement and escape, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, for example, the New York minister Lucius C. Matlack asserted that although "American Slavery" is "naturally and necessarily, the enemy of literature," still, slave narratives had drawn from this horrific system "the prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative." "From the soil of slavery itself," Matlack observed, "have sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system." Like Peabody, Matlack believed that these sublime and thrilling narratives would demonstrate the power of the human spirit and the force of eloquent outrage: "Gushing fountains of poetic thought, have started from beneath the rod of violence, that will long continue to slake the feverish thirst of humanity outraged, until swelling to a flood it shall rush with wasting violence over the ill-gotten heritage of the oppressor."¹¹ Another white writer, Charles Stearns, offered a similar faith in the power of "gushing fountains of poetic thought" in introducing his own telling of the experiences of Henry Box Brown in 1849. "O reader," Stearns states at the beginning of the narrative, "as you peruse this heart-rending tale, let the tear of sympathy roll freely from your eyes, and let the deep fountains of human feeling, which God has implanted in the breast of every son and daughter of Adam, burst forth from their enclosure, until a stream shall flow therefrom on to the surrounding world, of so invigorating and purifying a nature, as to arouse from the 'death of the sin' of slavery, and cleanse from the pollutions thereof, all with whom you may be connected."¹² These and other white writers seemed challenged to do justice to the emotional appeal of these narratives of enslavement and escape, but behind the excessive rhetoric was a

faith in the power of a first-person testimony against the evils of slavery. As one writer put it, "reason is met by sophistry; but narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men."¹³

"Reaching 'the hearts of men'," adds William L. Andrews, "was the rhetorical aim of practically all black autobiography in the first century of its existence," but many black autobiographers found this aim deflected by their readers' fascination with thrilling tales of escape.¹⁴ As many saw in these narratives stories "beside which the ordinary characters of romance are dull and tame,"¹⁵ perhaps it was to be expected that many readers focused more on the philosophical significance of the adventurous escape than on the system of slavery left behind. The broader cultural field of concerns for black abolitionists, in short, often meant working against the confines of what might be identified as antislavery literature. As Frances Smith Foster has argued, African American writers faced a basic but formidable challenge, for "while white abolitionists were eager to privilege the authenticity of black writers' descriptions of slavery, it was only insofar as their descriptions confirmed what white readers had actually accepted as true."¹⁶ In his important book *Impossible Witness: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony*, Dwight A. McBride comes to similar conclusions. As McBride argues, since abolitionist discourse "produced the occasion for bearing witness," it regularly prepared audiences for "an experience that had already been theorized and prophesied." "In this way," McBride observes, "the slave serves as a kind of fulfillment of the prophecy of abolitionist discourse ... Before the slave ever speaks, we know the slave; we know what his or her experience is, and we know how to read that experience."¹⁷

Simply stated, McBride is interested in what it meant to "tell the truth" about slavery in a world in which the language and conceptions of "truth" were themselves shaped by a largely white-led antislavery movement operating within a white supremacist culture. His approach connects with concerns shared by many scholars in highlighting the complex intertextuality of the antislavery movement, raising questions about antislavery readers, and raising questions as well about how we should understand the autobiographical subject after reading an autobiographical narrative. Accordingly, McBride and other scholars focus on the significant tensions between the stories expected by antislavery audiences and the narratives crafted by African American writers – an approach that requires that we work to identify what McBride terms "the rhetorical markers that constitute the terrain of abolitionist discourse," that is, the language, the rhetorical practices, and the habits of reading and interpretation that shaped how readers, both white and black,

would respond to African American literature and how African American writers worked to anticipate and even disrupt predictable responses.¹⁸

In short, African American writers often found themselves resisting not only slavery itself but also the cultural and racial dynamics of the very antislavery movement that provided them with an audience, and they responded to this challenge in various ways. Perhaps the most basic of these ways involved withholding information, refusing to satisfy mere curiosity in favor of a more demanding interaction with their readers. As Marcus Wood has noted, for example, Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* "gave models of how *not* to give the white Northern abolitionist readers what they wanted or expected" – the most notable being Douglass's sly omission of that part of his narrative in which readers would be most interested, the means of his escape from slavery.¹⁹ But African American attempts to work beyond confining expectations and assumptions – "to tell a free story," in Andrews's memorable phrase – affected nearly every aspect of African American autobiography, and increasingly so over time.²⁰ In his later autobiographies, for example, Douglass was more overt in his resistance, noting occasions on which he had encountered directly the limiting and often demeaning expectations of white audiences and abolitionist colleagues; representing his dialogue with white slaveholders, coworkers, and colleagues over the years; and narrating his life in such a way as to emphasize that this was not only a story of the struggle for freedom but also a story of the struggle to freely account for oneself and one's world.

Douglass's experiences are characteristic of many African American writers who worked not only to tell a different story than what white readers might anticipate but also to tell their stories differently so as to work around and beyond such expectations. Douglass's experiences in the antislavery movement, as Andrews has argued, shaped his approach to his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, for he had by that time "gained a perspective that allowed him to see signs of 'oppression' in the very 'form' of the fugitive slave narrative that he had written in 1845."²¹ Similarly, Harriet Jacobs struggled to find a white collaborator who would facilitate the presentation of her story without undermining Jacobs's authority to determine the essential elements of that story, leading her to reject an alliance with Harriet Beecher Stowe and to settle finally on the editorial assistance of white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. William Wells Brown's resistance to both the assumption of white authority and the narrative forms shaped by white expectations led to an even more radical form of autobiographical resistance – virtually a refusal to allow his autobiographies to hold him to any clear conception of a stable

identity. As I have written elsewhere, the various versions of Brown's autobiographical writings "correspond generally but sometimes contradict one another in their details, and often present inaccurate information – and one can easily become confused as to whose authority one is accepting in any given account."²² Taking in this overwhelming collection of contradictory information and even mixed genres, Russ Castronovo has observed that "these diverse autobiographical accounts do not so much constitute a complete life, inviolable in the authority of its own experiences, as they subtly reconstitute history, implying its mutable and selective aspects."²³

Given that even the writing of one's narrative involved complex acts of interracial negotiation and resistance, it is hardly surprising that some of the most sophisticated and accomplished narratives were produced by those who were most active in abolitionist, social reform, and civil rights efforts. Some of the most influential narratives were written by men and women who played prominent roles in the antislavery movement or in African American community service before, during, and after the Civil War. Harriet Jacobs (1813–97), for example, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), worked for a time in the Anti-Slavery Office and Reading Room directly above the offices of Douglass's antislavery newspaper *The North Star*, and she was active in philanthropic and reform work during and after the Civil War. Henry Bibb (1815–54), author of *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), became a prominent lecturer and founded the *Voice of the Fugitive*, an antislavery journal based in Canada. William (1824–1900) and Ellen Craft (1826–97), who recounted their unusual escape in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), made regular appearances on the antislavery lecture stage, both in the United States and in England, and eventually returned to the South to open Woodville, a cooperative farm and school in Georgia. William Wells Brown (c.1814–84) was one of the most prominent abolitionists of his day, and was active as well, both before and after the Civil War, in the temperance movement, which was itself sometimes divided along racial lines. Some of these narratives, indeed, emphasized even in their titles the rise to prominence and influence that sometimes followed a successful escape, as did *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (1849) and Samuel Ringgold Ward's *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada and England* (1855). The stories told in slave narratives, in short, were stories not simply about the evils of slavery but also about the challenges of fashioning black individuality and community in a white supremacist culture, challenges that often led to

rhetorical strategies that stretched, sometimes to the breaking point, the generic conventions of autobiographical narratives.

Indeed, in their increasingly strategic approaches to autobiographical writing, black abolitionists opened the way for the development of African American fiction and, over time, the African American novel – in part because, through fiction, African American writers could represent more fully the numerous contexts, concerns, and pressures that shaped African American life and that were necessarily a part of any comprehensive approach to antislavery activism and social reform. As Andrews has observed, the African American turn toward the novel began in the complex world of African American autobiography, and especially the slave narrative – a turn that Andrews has called “the novelized autobiography.”²⁴ Involved in this novelization of narrative are a number of significant characteristics of African American autobiographical writing as it developed over the years: “the supplementation of one narrative by a sequel, or one style by another; the intrusion of suspect voices into black autobiography, especially those that appeal to diversionary sentiments of any sort; the deliberate fictionalizing of texts in the 1850s and 1860s, notably through the use of reconstructed dialogue; [and] the problem of interpreting the dialectic of ‘romantic-realistic elements’ that all these kinds of supplements introduce into autobiography.”²⁵ In some cases, writers drew from these strategies and negotiated with these narrative presences in clear attempts to present an autobiographical narrative – for example, Frederick Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Jacob D. Green (1813–?) in *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green* (1864), and Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). In other cases, the blending of voices and techniques, and the mix of conventions associated with both autobiographical writing and fiction, have led many to question, in the past and today, how some texts should even be identified.

One fictionalized narrative of African American life in the North, written and published in association with abolitionist culture and publishers, has been identified both as a novel and as an autobiography: *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* By “Our Nig” (1859), by Harriet E. Wilson (1825–1900). The story of a young girl who is left by her mother to work as a domestic servant to a white family in a New Hampshire abolitionist town, *Our Nig* is a sometimes confusing blend of narrative perspectives (shifting freely from first person to third), novelistic conventions, and autobiographical assertions and features (including the standard appendix including testimonies to the trustworthiness of the narrator). Initial research suggested that Wilson

had written a novel based loosely on her own experiences in New Hampshire; further research has suggested that the narrative is much more autobiographical than at first imagined, though framed throughout with substantial novelizing techniques.

This generic mix is characteristic even of the narrative widely considered to be the first novel published by an African American, William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853). In this case, though, there is no reason to doubt that Brown was deliberately crafting a work of fiction, whereas one could argue that Wilson's intention was to write a veiled autobiography. Indeed, Brown revisited this text and published three other versions of it through the years, all of which were decidedly attempts to present the world with a novel. Still, *Clotel* begins with a significant autobiographical narrative, presented in the third-person voice: "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown." Following this narrative, which in various ways anticipates specific scenes and characters in the rest of *Clotel*, Brown presents a text that weaves together various stories, sources, anecdotes, documents, commentary, and fictionalized autobiographical experiences. Influenced by (and even integrating into its pages) other antislavery fiction, *Clotel* tells the story of a number of characters, black and white, whose lives are both indirectly and directly related, influenced, and, in some cases, destroyed by the system of slavery. Along the way, readers also encounter the realities of both a legal system and a religion corrupted by the practice of slavery, and they encounter as well a world of white and black Americans whose moral integrity, perspectives, expectations, and assumptions have been shaped by a white supremacist culture. In this way, Brown not only presents the personal testimony against slavery that had been the central feature of his earlier autobiographical narratives, but also accounts for the social world that prepares readers to misinterpret, misunderstand, or otherwise limit the intentions and potential force of those narratives. The opening narrative demonstrates how Brown himself was shaped by the world of slavery; the fictional narrative that follows offers a portrait of the United States as Brown has come to see and understand it. In short, Brown joins together the possibilities of fiction and autobiography so as to, in effect, "reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition," as Olney puts it, while also addressing the central question behind McBride's approach to the rhetorical challenge of antislavery witnessing: "What does it mean for a slave to bear witness to, or to tell the 'truth' about, slavery?"²⁶

Two prominent African American activists, Martin R. Delany (1812–85) and Frederick Douglass, similarly took advantage of the flexibility of fiction to

negotiate the realities of race-based slavery and to explore the possibilities of revolutionary social reform. One of the major works of antebellum African American fiction, Delany's *Blake: or the Huts of America; A Tale of the Mississippi Valley, The Southern United States, and Cuba* is a complex novel divided into two parts with many interweaving narrative lines, encompassing life and politics in the United States, Cuba, and Africa. It was never presented in book form until Floyd J. Miller published in 1970 what is believed to be an incomplete version, and many chapters from *Blake* first appeared in serial form in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, and then in the *Weekly Anglo-African* in 1861–62. Throughout the novel, Delany alters and conflates historical events, recasts historical figures, and challenges existing narratives of the struggle for freedom. For example, Delany writes a version of the conventional antislavery narrative, involving the journey from slavery to Canada, but he has that story culminate not at the end but in the novel's middle, thus emphasizing the need to extend the struggle beyond individual tales of liberation so as to imagine wide-scale social reform. Moreover, Delany leads the reader to the vision of a violent revolution, initiated in Cuba but with a significant background (and considerable hints about an organized conspiracy) in the United States.

Douglass also explores a tale of physical resistance in "The Heroic Slave," which first appeared in 1853 in both *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and an antislavery anthology *Autographs for Freedom*. In this novella, Douglass begins by making a point of the racial politics of historical documentation – that is, the process by which the lives and deeds of some are recorded, while those of others are not, observing in the opening sentence that "the State of Virginia is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen and heroes."²⁷ Douglass presents in "The Heroic Slave" a fictionalized version of the story missing from those annals, the story of an actual man, Madison Washington, who successfully led a slave mutiny aboard the slave ship *Creole* in 1841. "Let those account for it who can," the story's narrator states in the opening paragraph, "but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry, – who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson, – and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State."²⁸ Working against a culture that fails to acknowledge or record African American history without misrepresentations, significant omissions, or distortions, Douglass has the narrator of this fictional work promise his readers only a history constructed of "glimpses" into a subject "covered with mystery" and "enveloped in darkness."²⁹ Significantly, the story that follows is

one that emphasizes conversations, monologues, antislavery speeches, and prayers overheard by eavesdroppers, intentional and otherwise. In this way and others, Douglass recasts familiar antislavery rhetoric in unfamiliar settings, accounts for the ways in which both black abolitionists and their white audiences were usually positioned in relation to one another, and works to revitalize the possibilities of antislavery testimony.

Often, African American abolitionists worked to place familiar rhetoric in unfamiliar settings by taking their message abroad. Many writers were, like Douglass, forced to move to England to avoid recapture, for their arrival in the Northern United States did not mean that their newfound “freedom” would be recognized by the US legal system. Indeed, some of their most important productions – Brown’s *Clotel* and the Crafts’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, among many others – were first published in England, and were often directed specifically to a British readership. What one scholar has called “a black abolitionist mission to the British Isles” became especially pronounced in the 1850s following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in the United States, a federal act that severely threatened the safety of many of the formerly enslaved in the Northern states.³⁰ But the African American presence in Britain had long played a prominent role in the publication and distribution of African American abolitionist writings. “Between 1830 and 1865,” C. Peter Ripley has observed, “black abolitionists left universities, newspaper offices, cabinet shops, pulpits, and plantations for the British Isles. Some boarded the best Cunard Line ships after elaborate farewell gatherings; others sneaked out of the American and Canadian harbors just ahead of slave catchers”³¹ – and many of these men and women went with narratives, orations, and other pamphlets and books either in hand or in mind, and they found audiences in Britain. One might say, too, that African American writers traveled to Britain by other means as well, without leaving the United States, for references to Britain were a regular presence in the African American antislavery press. Indeed, many black abolitionist writers turned pointedly and regularly to British writers, past and present, for inspiration, guidance, and a significant point about views on slavery in a nation beyond the boundaries of the land of the brave and the home of the free. They did so not only in order to make a point about the irony of antislavery leadership coming from a nation against which a revolution was fought in the name of freedom, but also because the literature of that nation, Great Britain, seemed deeply rooted in the experience and often the cause of those of African origins, particularly those oppressed and enslaved.

The international, historical, and intertextual nature of African American abolitionist writing is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the poetry that

appeared regularly in antislavery publications. Both the rhetoric of sentiment and the rhetoric of Christian morality was important in all genres of writing, but they were particularly so in poetry, for in poetry especially the reader's sentimental engagement with the portrayal of slavery was itself part of the point. While most British abolitionist poets "made use," as Brycchan Carey observes, "of sentimental parables, sentimental arguments, and the emotional subversion of the intellect, the characteristic technique of sentimental rhetoric in poetry was the rejection of false sensibility, and the assertion of an active sensibility that had political action as its end."³² The power of poetry, and the need for a politically oriented, active sensibility, was not lost on African American abolitionist writers in the nineteenth century, who similarly turned to poetry not just to engage the sentiments of their readers but also to distinguish between true and false sensibility. It is no surprise, then, that just as antislavery poems were everywhere in the eighteenth-century British antislavery movement – "published singly, in collections, in newspapers and journals, in chapbooks, and as broadsheet ballads"³³ – so too did they saturate newspapers, books, and lecture halls in the nineteenth-century United States. In their narratives, fictional works, essays, and orations, African American writers quoted, reprinted, and adapted poetry and hymns to punctuate or situate important points – and this poetry was often in the background of the poetry produced by African American abolitionists themselves.

Indeed, poetry – written and oral, secular and sacred – was the heart of African American abolitionist expressive culture. Among the most influential poetic expressions produced in resistance to slavery were the songs of the enslaved themselves, songs that eventually became known as the spirituals that have long played a prominent role in American religious and political life. In his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass writes, "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do."³⁴ Emerging not within the contexts provided by the antislavery movement but out of the experience of slavery, the spirituals were themselves the most essential of abolitionist expressive culture, songs formed collectively over time and often across great spaces – for as people were moved from place to place, so the spirituals themselves moved in performance and composition. And the spirituals proved also to be the most lasting, powerful, and adaptable expressions of freedom and fundamental human rights. The great African American writer, educator, diplomat, and songwriter James Weldon Johnson praised the collective and anonymous authors of the spirituals in his poem "O Black and Unknown Bards," a poem

that compares the spirituals with the greatest artistic achievements of humankind, ending with an inspiring tribute:

You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live – but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.³⁵

The spirituals worked not only to resist oppression but also to preserve the humanity of those who sang them, for in collective performances black workers communicated beyond the restrictions of enslavement and labor to forge communities that would otherwise be defined only by a common condition of oppression. The spirituals, in short, embodied the fullness of the abolitionist message, beyond the limited goal of eliminating the system of slavery.

In sharp contrast to the spirituals, the poems authored and published by individual black writers who contributed to the abolitionist cause have been largely ignored by later generations, though they were often quite prominent in their time. While many poems were written to inspire opposition to slavery, many were composed specifically for events and publications sponsored by the abolitionist movement. One of William Wells Brown's first publications, for example, was a collection of poems and songs, only a few of which he wrote himself, titled *The Anti-Slavery Harp; a Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings* (1848). In putting together this sort of compilation, Brown was following the practices of white abolitionists. Indeed, he borrowed songs that had earlier appeared in Jairus Lincoln's *Anti-Slavery Melodies* (1843) and George W. Clark's *The Liberty Minstrel* (1844), and he took many other songs from antislavery newspapers. Many of these songs would be performed at antislavery events, and some were composed specifically for that purpose. Frances Ellen Watkins [Harper] and Charlotte Forten both composed songs for the Commemorative Festival held in Boston in 1859, for example songs that were performed by the Attucks Glee Club and the Northern Vocalists. As these examples suggest, many abolitionist poems were either written to be performed or adapted to be sung, and many abolitionist poets crafted antislavery poetry from existing popular songs. William Wells Brown includes in many of his books antislavery adaptations of songs from the blackface minstrel stage, and Joshua McCarter Simpson similarly composed a great number of antislavery lyrics adapted from established songs. The creative dissonance of antislavery lyrics performed to melodies originally associated with racist songs was, in fact, part of the abolitionist message.

The performative aspect of abolitionist poetry was important not only to promote and enhance antislavery events but also to foster the development of a culture and a community joined in resistance to slavery. Like Brown and Simpson, many of these writers reworked existing poems and songs to relay an antislavery message while commenting implicitly on the racism or the failed ideals of the dominant culture. Henry Box Brown, for example, was known for his recitation of both a "Thanksgiving Hymn," drawn from the Bible, and a reworking of a minstrel tune, "Uncle Ned," to relate the story of his escape from slavery. Less direct but even more forceful, James M. Whitfield (1822–71), one of the most powerful African American poets of his time, echoes a familiar patriotic song in the opening lines of his poem "America": "America, it is to thee / Though boasted land of liberty / It is to thee I raise my song."³⁶ By such means, African American and other antislavery poets frequently worked to draw from the familiar to redirect their readers and audiences to a larger point about the foundations of American culture, about the cancerous racism eating away at those foundations, and about the violation of the nation's professed principles. Even the production of poetry by black writers could be viewed as a significant intervention into cultural assumptions. Keith D. Leonard argues, in fact, that "the cultural assimilation of poetic mastery was the abolitionist poet's greatest act of resistance, an act exemplified by his or her self-constitution as genius as that self-concept was validated by the slaveholding and abolitionist reading public."³⁷ Other scholars have been more critical of the literary quality of black abolitionist poetry, but have still recognized the value of this work within the context of abolitionist culture. Indeed, in an important twentieth-century anthology, *Early Black American Poets*, William H. Robinson, Jr., gathers many of the abolitionist poets under the heading of "declamatory orator-poets" – that is, writers who geared their poetry for the public events and broad audiences of the abolitionist movement.³⁸ Robinson echoes many twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers in finding in this poetry "cling-clang meters, extravagant patriotism, often cloying sentimentality ... bombast and naive optimism," but Robinson notes as well the special demands that shaped the poetry of the abolitionist movement. "These lines," he notes, "were usually most effective when they were read aloud, or, more accurately, when they were 'rendered' on platforms of convention halls or opera houses or church pulpits across the country; sometimes freely participated in by audience responses, laughter, applause, these lines were close to the sermons."³⁹ Robinson offered this opinion in 1969, and in most of the years that followed few scholars came to different conclusions about the literary quality of the poems, and fewer still

explored the rich contexts in which the poems were performed. Scholars have more recently started to reconsider the means by which the literary quality of abolitionist poetry might be evaluated, and by which the power of this poetry, in its time and beyond, might be more justly and comprehensively appreciated.

Poetry was published, in print and in person, in every forum imaginable. Antislavery newspapers regularly included poetry interspersed among articles, editorials, and advertisements; antislavery books designed to both promote the cause and raise money included poetry; performances of poetry and song were included in antislavery events; and antislavery writers included poetry prominently in their autobiographical narratives, plays, orations, and other publications. Whitfield published in white abolitionist Julia Griffith's *Autographs for Freedom* and the antislavery newspapers *The Liberator* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, regularly read poems at black churches and other public forums, and in 1853 published a book, *America and Other Poems*; William Wells Brown included poems in the wide variety of books that he published throughout his career, and he regularly performed songs at antislavery events; and Elymas Payson Rogers prepared such lengthy works as *A Poem on the Fugitive Slave Law* (1855) and *The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise Considered* (1856) for public presentation. In all of these cases, the connection between poetic expression and activist determination was strong, as is evidenced most dramatically by the best-known African American poet of her time, Frances E. W. Harper (1825–1911), known as Frances Watkins during most of her antislavery career. A professional lecturer (for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society) at a time when audiences did not readily accept female public speakers, and an untiring activist in the abolitionist movement, Harper earned a respected reputation as a poet, publishing numerous books of poetry, some of which appeared in many editions. Indeed, the black abolitionist William Still (1821–1902) estimated after the Civil War that Harper had sold over 50,000 volumes of poetry.⁴⁰ In most of her work, Harper drew from familiar poetic forms to engage her readers in the subject of slavery by transforming the rhetorical possibilities of poetry. As Maryemma Graham has argued, “Harper’s addition of dramatic details, vivid imagery, and her effective understanding of Afro-American life, together with her political sensibility, transformed the common ballad into a distinctly Afro-American discourse.”⁴¹

As the work of these “orator-poets” indicates, the literary art encouraged by the abolitionist movement was characterized by public performance, artful explanation, and a clear message. Often, the performance was quite overt, as in the numerous plays that African Americans staged among themselves in

various church, fraternal, or reading societies. Indeed, the one antislavery play written and published by an African American before the Civil War – William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) – was a study in African American performative strategies. Taking advantage of the opportunity to step out of his expected role as a former slave relating experiences from his life, Brown performed all of the parts of the play himself – black and white, proslavery and antislavery – sometimes presenting it in place of a scheduled antislavery lecture. More often still, the performance involved the presentation of facts and the characterization of people and attitudes encountered in a world defined by the system of slavery and legalized racism. Douglass, for example, was known for his “pathos and humor,” and for his talent for mimicry and caricature. Frances Watkins was forced to be even more deeply and complexly performative, for as a relatively young, unmarried, childless, and black woman, she lacked access even to the usual means by which women could claim authority (by virtue of age, or marital affiliation, or the priorities and prerogatives of motherhood), and her light complexion led many to speculate that she was actually white and posing as black. Accordingly, as Foster notes, “as a writer and lecturer, Watkins was a complex and confounding figure” known for her “soft musical voice” and her forceful and imaginative presentation.⁴² For Watkins, in short, the challenge was to perform herself in a world that was unprepared to recognize the authority of her role on the public stage.

Given both the value and the necessity of performance, and given that African Americans in public life often found themselves, as it were, *on stage*, it is hardly surprising that the most prominent and influential form of African American literature in the abolitionist movement, not excluding the slave narrative, was the oration. In various halls, churches, and outdoor platforms – wherever they might gain a hearing – African American abolitionists devoted their talents to presenting lectures on the subject of slavery. Many of these orations were soon published, either in pamphlet form (a popular and inexpensive format) or in the antislavery press (which regularly either reprinted or summarized the lectures). Indeed, the antislavery lectures are among the most artful examples of African American expressive culture before the Civil War. A great deal of abolitionist literature was written by men and women who first told their stories, presented their case, and encountered their audiences on the antislavery lecture circuit. Quite simply, African American writers learned much about the challenge of working within a white supremacist culture through the experience of preparing and presenting lectures, and it is impossible to appreciate the richly crafted dynamics of African American literature

of this time without understanding the often difficult experience of speaking to both unfriendly and complaisantly benevolent but often racist audiences.

More often than not, even the *occasions* for these orations were significant. One of the most famous speeches of the nineteenth century, for example, was presented by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852 – a speech in which Douglass argues that the Fourth of July is not a day for celebrating liberty but rather a day that reveals to the slave, “more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”⁴³ Honoring the white national history celebrated on the Fourth of July, Douglass can only note, on July 5, that the white commemorative calendar only emphasizes to African Americans the fundamental violation of principles central to national life. Small wonder, then, that so many African American orations were presented to recognize a different calendar. As Marcus Wood has noted, “there was an unbroken history of African American freedom festivals in the Northern free states, which focused upon dates which had special resonance for those of slave descent in the Americas,” including “1 January, a date commemorating Toussaint l’Ouverture’s declaration of the independent state of Hayti, and the outlawing of the American Atlantic slave trade; 5 July, because of the passage of 1799 and 1817 gradual abolition legislation; and 1 August, because it commemorated British Emancipation in the Caribbean colonies.”⁴⁴ At these events, there were always orations, orations that often were subsequently published, representing a public and collective response to the cultural politics confronted by those in the antislavery movement.

Douglass’s speech is a notable example of the means by which African American orators accounted for a benevolent but still culturally distant audience. Immediately, Douglass makes not only the national holiday but also his white audience a subject of his lecture. “Why am I called upon to speak here to-day?” he asks; “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?”⁴⁵ Noting that “this Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*,” Douglass confronts his audience with their own unexamined assumptions about the significance of the national celebration of liberty: “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?”⁴⁶ This direct challenge is, in fact, part of what distinguishes Douglass’s July 5 speech, for Douglass simply makes explicit what usually was implicit in American culture. Just as he openly questions the assumptions and intentions behind his invitation to speak, so he uses the occasion to address directly the often unspoken responses to antislavery rhetoric. Having asserted the necessity of resisting slavery, Douglass immediately comments on an imagined response to his

declarative approach. "I fancy," he adds, "I hear some one of my audience say, it is just in this circumstance that you and your brother abolitionists fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you argue more, and denounce less, would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed."⁴⁷ As if to engage in and continue this dialogue, Douglass asserts in response to this imagined charge from the audience, "I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued."⁴⁸ He then goes through the possible arguments he might be expected to present. "Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man?"; "Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty?"; "must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is *wrong*?"⁴⁹ In each case, Douglass demonstrates that white American culture has already answered these questions or revealed the answers through their actions. "What, then," Douglass asks, "remains to be argued?"; and he answers, "at a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed."⁵⁰ Douglass uses this speech, in other words, to address not just the situation of abolitionism but also the rhetorical possibilities available to those in the movement, and in this way his speech addresses not only the subject at hand but also the larger topic to which this chapter is devoted – the creation of African American expressive culture within the abolitionist movement.

Douglass's is but a notable example of many remarkable orations devoted to the abolitionist cause, and Douglass was one of many African American speakers who faced a wide variety of audiences and occasions for his remarks. Through these different forums, and in response to the assumptions, demands, sympathy, and sometimes prejudices of the various audiences they encountered, the essential features of African American literature and expressive culture were forged and refined. Some of these speeches come to us only second hand, as is the case with Sojourner Truth's remarkable record of public speaking. But even in those cases, what remains clear is the presence of a dramatic, improvisational mode, an approach to rhetorical performance often deeply rooted in the Bible, complexly historical, poetic, and aggressively moral. Through oration, African American abolitionists could account for the many rhetorical layers that characterized some of the most deeply debated concerns of their day; they could address the complex process by which history could be recovered and the Bible and other foundational texts might be interpreted; and they could draw from these talents to determine when and where a direct and plain statement of fact might be most effective.

Orations are central to the African American literary tradition, too, because they emphasize the importance of context – of the forum, the occasion, and

the audience for their rhetorical performance. Douglass spoke to a white audience who had invited him to present a speech commemorating Independence Day; Sara G. Stanley – in “What, to the Toiling Millions There, Is This Boasted Liberty?” (1856) – addressed the black Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Delaware, Ohio; Sojourner Truth addressed a wide range of audiences, always forcing them to consider the interrelation among a number of social, moral, and political concerns, and always challenging the assumptions of those who wished to keep race and gender, or feminism and anti-slavery, as separate concerns. Many antislavery lecturers traveled broadly in the United States, often at some risk to their personal safety, and many took the American antislavery message abroad. Sarah Parker Redmond, William Wells Brown, Douglass, and many others presented speeches in Europe during often extended visits; Brown, Frances Harper, Henry Bibb, Douglass, and many others gave numerous speeches in the Northern United States as official representatives of various antislavery organizations. African Americans lectured regularly, tirelessly, and eloquently in numerous forums, capitalizing on opportunities as they were offered and often creating their own opportunities – for example, in the various black-organized state and national conventions that extended from the 1830s through most of the Civil War.

Often, the audiences for African American orations were engaged in these speeches just as directly and as sharply as in Douglass’s talk in Rochester, but at times identifying the primary audience for the oration is a more complex affair. The latter is the case, for example, in the most famously militant statement of the time, *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*, by Henry Highland Garnet (1815–82), presented at the National Convention of Negro Citizens at Buffalo, New York, in August of 1843. In this speech, Garnet admonishes the enslaved that they have a “moral obligation” to resist slavery, and he advises them that it is better to “*die freemen than live to be slaves.*”⁵¹ This address occasioned considerable debate at the Convention, as the delegates argued over whether to adopt it as an official statement coming out of the Convention. The Convention voted against it – by one vote – with Frederick Douglass prominent among those who argued that the address was too violent, and that it would be dangerous to those slaves it might reach, and dangerous to African Americans everywhere when white Americans read it. In this case, one might assume that the direct audience for the speech, as indicated by the title, were those who were miles away, enslaved in the South. Garnet speaks to this audience directly – but one might say that, in speaking to those enslaved in the South, Garnet was also speaking rather directly and pointedly to those in the North, those attending the Buffalo

Convention, and those who enjoyed relative freedom and opportunities for social activism, and that the title of the address was not limited to Southern slavery.

As the record of narratives, fiction, poetry, orations indicates, African American literature produced in association with the abolitionist movement was widely traveled and presented in a vast variety of forums – from newspapers to books, from lectures to narratives, from public speeches to printed pamphlets. The variety of opportunities and audiences, of genres and rhetorical strategies, was necessary, for the challenge these artists faced was great. The literature of the abolitionist movement had an impossible story to tell: the story of the many lives affected by slavery, and the story of a world that relied on racial misrepresentations in order to maintain the authority and privileges of the dominant population. On November 14, 1847, William Wells Brown delivered a lecture to the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts, in which he asserted that “Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented.”⁵² The African American writers who devoted their talents to the abolitionist movement were, accordingly, artists of the impossible – devoted to stories that resisted representation, stories addressed to audiences who often approached the subject with either careless benevolence or unexamined prejudice, but stories that demanded a proper and just telling all the same. It is no wonder that the literature produced in relation to the abolitionist movement has been so deeply influential – extending far beyond the Civil War in various autobiographies and memoirs, and in such histories as William Still’s vastly influential *Underground Rail Road* (1872), and extending even farther in such traditions as the neo-slave narratives that were published throughout the twentieth century, or in the various memoirs, histories, and even children’s books that still attempt to tell the impossible story of the past. This was a tradition, in other words, that shaped much of what followed, and that still stands as a challenging example of the determination to put literary art to work, to realize the practical value of an aesthetic model that finds lasting value in the effort to create not just timeless but also significantly *timely* literature.

Notes

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Writing freedom: race, religion, and revolution, 1820–1840

KIMBERLY BLOCKETT

In a letter to Maria Stewart about one of her essays in *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison praises her argument “pertaining to the condition of that class with which you were complexionally identified.”¹ Although his intent was only to compliment the work of Stewart, he also identified one of the central conundrums for free blacks in the antebellum period: that of being free, yet slave-classed. “We wish to plead our own cause,” the motto for *Freedom’s Journal*, the country’s first black newspaper, speaks to both the independence of antebellum black activists and thinkers and the ways in which literature produced for and by free blacks before 1865 could never be entirely independent of slavery and abolitionism. The phrase itself, “wish to plead,” emphasized a desire to address one’s status as free and black in America while making a case for giving voice in an environment that would deny the voices of *all* blacks, free or enslaved. Inevitably, in the American cultural imagination, African Americans were a monolithic group, all *slave-classed*. In this way, free blacks and enslaved blacks were inextricably intertwined.

Thus, the literature produced by free blacks of the nineteenth century, whether or not its subject was slavery, could not escape the context of enslavement. Slave ships, auction blocks, fugitives, and insurrections all served as an omnipresent backdrop. Consequently, black writers of the antebellum period produced a particular kind of literature that walked a political tightrope. Their literature was always a complex negotiation of the African slave trade – even as it pleaded for its own cause. On the one hand, free blacks had specific economic and social concerns that had nothing to do with enslavement. On the other hand, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, slavery was *the* issue for a new country still defining itself. All black literature, independent or otherwise, was bound to the social conventions, which both defined and confined it. African American clergy, editors, journalists, lecturers, and community leaders had a very specific

charge: to give blacks an identity within a new nation. Although these individuals understood that they were in no way representative of the masses, they were often in the inevitable, yet highly contentious, position of speaking *for* them, a marginalized and oppressed majority of African Americans. The extant literature of free blacks documents a threefold struggle: (1) to differentiate between the free and enslaved blacks, and their subsequent experiences; (2) to recognize the “burden of slavery” for all blacks and work tirelessly for both abolition, in particular, and racial equality in general; and (3) to maintain a black presence in the literary culture of the United States and contribute to the sociopolitical discourses of the American people.

For the most part, the literature covered in this chapter worked to those ends in two different ways: protest or participation. Protest literature included prose that denounced race-based oppression and promoted social equality and upward mobility in urban, black communities. However, some of the literature, such as poetry and drama, represented mainstream literary forms and contributed to the newly established field of American literary art. Of course, there was often an inevitable overlapping of form and purpose, and the lines between protesting oppression and participating in artistic genres were fuzzy, at best. For instance, a few spiritual autobiographies published during the period were not intended for social protest or literary artistry, *per se*. Most of these narratives were published by black churches, a nineteenth-century institution that was fiercely political and intent on showcasing both the literacy and the Christian morality of its congregations. As such, their presses would deny publication of texts that did not conform to their agendas of racial uplift and religious conversion or satisfy their classical literary aesthetic. Thus, in both content and form, black spiritual narratives were neither devoid of social protest nor beyond poetic consideration. These autobiographies had to navigate among fidelity to the writer’s experiences, the demands of a genre, and the extra-literary demands of white and black readers. Although we might attempt to classify authors neatly into categories for purposes of discussion, some, such as Maria Stewart, produced works in several forms and genres.

Ultimately, despite the free status of the author, pre-Civil War black independent literature, by virtue of its very existence, always begged the question: what does “independent” mean if the literature is produced by those identified with a race of enslaved people. This is the paradox evident in *Freedom’s Journal’s* motto. “Plead our own cause” might be read as the literary version of Nat Turner’s 1831 slave rebellion. Understanding the complexities of the far-reaching effects of the peculiar institution (slavery) as only they could, free blacks wrenched control of their literate expressions away

from benevolent, and often paternalistic, whites. The act of publishing, independent of abolitionists, was an act of violent resistance – giving voice to those whom the country would prefer be seen, as in the spectacles of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Thomas Gray’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), and not heard.

The literary resistance to American slavery and its inherent paternalism took its shape from the American Revolution. Indeed, the Revolution radically shifted the racial and social class landscape of Northern cities and, in doing so, ushered in a new era of black literary production. In most Northern states, manumission had been made difficult by fees, security payments, and other financial obstacles. However, as early as 1774, states began paving the way for slaveowners to emancipate blacks without penalty. Tellingly, by the time the American Revolution was well underway, the rhetoric of freedom and inalienable rights began to take hold of the Northern cultural conscience. By the height of the war most states began passing manumission laws requiring gradual emancipation of all slaves, usually into indentured servitude until the age of eighteen or twenty years, depending on the state. Thus by 1800 the majority of Northern states had either abolished legal enslavement or passed abolition acts that would effectively end it for most blacks by the 1820s. In urban areas, the large concentrations of free African Americans readily lent itself to entrepreneurship and the first establishment of a black middle class.²

What the literature makes abundantly clear is that the battle to establish civil rights would be fought on two fronts: literacy and morality. For better or for worse, black writers’ desire to distinguish themselves and gain social and economic recognition for their communities was very much a class-based struggle. The more established free blacks became, the more of an oxymoron the very idea of a “black middle class” became for both blacks and whites. For blacks, the intraracial class conflict imbedded within racial uplift was problematic. For instance, in 1833 Noah Calwell Cannon, a self-educated black man from the South, published *Rock of Wisdom: An Explanation of the Sacred Scriptures* (1833), a poetic reinterpretation of Methodism, world history, and the Bible.³ The New York Conference twice censured the book for its theology, and, in *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1891), Daniel Alexander Payne showed a distinct class-bias in his critique of the book’s prose, which he attributed to Cannon’s lack of formal education. Notwithstanding the hostile reception to Cannon’s literary efforts, the oral poetics of his sermons were lauded. The instance exemplifies the educational schism especially between rural and urban blacks, the former perceived as being “better” off than their Southern counterparts. While the vast majority of

free blacks in non-urban regions across the United States were poverty-stricken or barely sustaining a reasonable existence, Northeastern and mid-Atlantic cities could boast sizeable communities of free black landowners, small-business owners, and a handful of wealthy entrepreneurs. These were the precursors to W. E. B. Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" whose desire and abilities (or lack thereof) to speak for the majority were just as controversial as Du Bois's manifesto would be some eighty years later. For whites, the problem of a black middle class manifested itself as public fear of social equality. General resentment of upwardly mobile blacks moved state legislatures to encroach steadily onto what few civil rights free blacks enjoyed. By the late 1830s, for instance, free blacks in Pennsylvania had more legal restrictions and fewer civil liberties than they had in the 1700s owing to the Reform Convention of 1837–38. The perception of the Northern blacks as making steady progress, therefore, was hardly supported by the facts. As their very humanity became more contested, blacks expressed an even more urgent need to showcase both their literacy and their moral authority. As such, one of the primary responses to the sociopolitical setbacks faced by free blacks was to build a more literate community through political prose: pamphleteering, public lectures, literary societies, and an independent press.

Among the earliest forms of black protest literature are pamphlets, which were written and distributed as early as the 1790s. They were brief, discrete publications that could be read aloud to groups – an important concern for black communities that lacked access to literacy and were ever expanding with newly manumitted and fugitive slaves. For instance, David Walker urged that his 1829 *Appeal*, distinctive in its fiery rhythm and cadence, be "used by activists as actors would use a play: they should perform it for those who could not read or write."⁴ Pamphlets offered more immediacy than books and more depth than the popular broadsides (a one-sided, large page of print), providing a literary venue that appealed to black activists who had a multitude of diverse social issues to address and not a lot of time or money with which to do it. Pamphleteers read and responded to each other, and popular, controversial pamphlets were often reprinted in white and black newspapers. Pamphleteering became "an expansive medium which [connected] reader and writer via words, emotions, and a common passion."⁵

It was through this medium that protesters held their new country accountable to its Constitution. For free blacks in the North, freedom was a direct result of the resistance to the tyranny of Britain. Language borrowed from the American Revolution would form the rhetorical foundation for black nationalism, hence the painfully ironic title *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles*;

Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America. This self-published pamphlet struck fear in the hearts of whites across America by calling attention to the glaring hypocrisies of the US Constitution and demanding violent resistance to the institution of enslavement and institutionalized racism in every state, North and South.

David Walker, born free in North Carolina, moved to Boston in the mid-1820s and was a regular contributor to *Freedom's Journal*. His *Appeal*, although published in the North, was smuggled to several Southern states, causing general unease among Southern whites. In fact, Nat Turner's 1831 insurrection was thought to be a direct result of Walker's call to arms. That conjecture and Walker's own prophecy of his death – "I expect some will try to put me to death"⁶ – led to even more conjecture about his mysterious demise one year later. Walker also predicts the Civil War, cautioning that "the Lord our God will bring other destructions upon them ... [he will] cause them to rise up one against another, to be split and divided, and to oppress each other, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand."⁷ Here, he evokes the punitive language of the Old Testament while alluding to the Constitution when he asks what went wrong with such "united and happy people"⁸ who, in their own pursuits of happiness, subjugate others.

It is little wonder that Walker and other black writers turned the Constitution on its head, given the free and easy way that white colonists likened their own plights to enslavement, and Patrick Henry voiced his national call to "give me liberty or give me death." As Ian Finseth notes, Walker quotes from the Declaration of Independence and "talks back" to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Henry Clay's colonization efforts, and the authors of the United States Constitution.⁹ The blending of both nationalist and anti-nationalist rhetoric in Walker's incendiary publication, Finseth argues, is not unlike much antislavery writing whose argument is "positioned ... within and against the master narrative of American progress. The characteristic double impulse of this rhetoric involved the simultaneity of oppositional passions and conservative fidelities."¹⁰ Indeed, much nineteenth-century black independent thought was conservative at heart, without intention to upend the country so much as to force it to live up to what it purported to be. With few exceptions, independent black literature internalized and upheld the founding principles of the new nation. For Walker's part, his *Appeal* deftly weaves language from biblical examples, political documents, and social science. In addition to exposing the hypocrisy and flawed morality of white "Christians," the rhetoric is at once a call to arms based on racial

solidarity while refuting biological claims of racial inferiority. On more than one occasion, Walker's language is indicative of a larger, social tension between "scientific" theories of race largely internalized by blacks and whites and his more subversive argument that the degradation of his race was socially constructed by enslavement. Denouncing both emigration to Africa and separatism within the States, the *Appeal* sounds a decidedly masculinist, black nationalist alarm, bringing both black and white men to task for their failures. Walker calls upon black men to be leaders in the schools and the churches of the black communities in order to "prove to Americans and the world, that we are Men and not brutes."¹¹ As for white men, he asserts that there is no reason that the two races cannot coexist peacefully as long as whites can "repent and reform."¹²

Less than a decade later, Robert Purvis's pamphlet also utilizes the principles of moral suasion prominent in post-revolutionary writing. *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania* (1838) calls upon white Pennsylvanians to heed the content and the intention of its 1790 state constitution. Purvis's *Appeal* is a response to the state legislature's intent to repeal, among many other rights, the existing voting rights for eligible blacks. It argues that the formation of the 1790 Constitution consisted of hard-fought debates and ultimate consensus to grant suffrage for *all* men over the age of twenty-one who had established residency and paid property taxes:

Such was the intention of the framers. In the original draft reported by a committee of nine, the word "WHITE" stood before "FREEMAN." On motion of Albert Gallatin it was stricken out, for the express purpose of including colored citizens with the pale of the elective franchise.¹³

Framing his *Appeal* as a continual reminder of the founding principles of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, Purvis strategically invokes the American Revolution by declaring the patriotism of black Americans and asking if it is the state's intent to disassemble "what our fathers bled to unite, to wit, TAXATION and REPRESENTATION."¹⁴

Other extant pamphlets include Robert Alexander Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto Issued in Defense of the Black Man's Rights in the Scale of Universal Freedom* (1829) and David Ruggles's *New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837*. In addition to the written protests, other popular pamphlets began as speeches and lectures and were later printed for wider distribution, such as William Hamilton's *Address to the National Convention of 1834* and Elizabeth Wicks's *Address Delivered before the African Female Benevolent Society of Troy*

(1834). For the first few decades of the century, these lectures-turned-pamphlets formed a complex, multivalent literature of black nationalism that evolved from oral declarations of self-reliance, freedom, and civil rights.

Although public expressions of black independent thought were predominately male, the desire to “show and prove” black strength was not exclusive to men. The lectures and essays of Maria Stewart (1803–79) appropriate the rhetoric of black nationalists and colonizationists even as she directly questions their masculinity. Stewart began writing after being widowed early in her marriage and then swindled out of her husband’s estate. One of her earliest publications, *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1832), records her private, spiritual struggle to move through profound grief in order to be a public servant of God. However, Stewart’s later essays and lectures clearly show her ideological affinities to David Walker, a close friend, just as they establish her as an early feminist theologian. In an unlikely pairing, Stewart’s speeches and compositions utilize both the masculinist speech of Walker’s black nationalism and the theological language of the Christian Bible to launch feminist defenses of her tireless work as a lecturer and essayist.

In *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build* (1831), Stewart is adamant that the answer to racial uplift is education, placing that responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the black community. Although all of Stewart’s rhetoric, written or spoken, proposed the acceptance of national and international integration, her prescriptions for advancement often employed separatist verbiage. In *Religion*, she contends that it is “of no use for us to sit with our hands folded, hanging our heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition” and calls for women to use private instruction, build their own schools, and run their own grocery markets. In 1833, Stewart was the first American woman to speak before a promiscuous audience (i.e. women *and* men), where she issued an aggressive challenge to black men. “Is it blindness of mind or stupidity of soul or want of education that has caused our men never to let their voices be heard nor their hands be raised in behalf of their color? Or has it been for fear of offending the whites?” she asks. Stewart concludes, “If you are men, convince them that you possess the spirit of men.”¹⁵ Like Walker, Maria Stewart calls for her peers to “Show forth [their] powers of mind [and] Prove to the world . . . that God hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect . . . and according to the constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free and equal.”¹⁶

Although Stewart and Walker shared similar ideas about race, religion, and politics, Stewart argued further that black women were integral to the project of social and cultural advancement. As such, she called into question the

actions and attitudes of some black women just as she had those of their male counterparts. After citing the many accomplishments and attributes of women throughout history, Stewart's address to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society (Spring 1832) asks them to consider the ways in which they and their communities participated in their own oppression. Citing the unity and revolutionary spirit of the Greeks, French, Haitians, and Poles when they stood together against their enemies, Stewart charges that there were "no traitors among them"¹⁷ and states that "we and our fathers have dealt treacherously with one another, and ... we had rather die than see each other rise an inch above a beggar."¹⁸ Stewart challenged black men and women to respect the strengths of the other and put aside individual differences, pettiness, and fears. All of Stewart's lectures were published individually in *The Liberator* and compiled in *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1835). Just before her death in 1879, she published her collected works as the second edition of *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*.

In the end, the progression of Stewart's lectures from spiritual to overtly political concerns had severe consequences. In her final public lecture, *Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston* (September 21, 1833), she demands "what if I *am* a woman ...?" citing preaching women of the Bible as a defiant response to the hostility she faced because of her fiery exhortations to black men (*italics mine*).¹⁹ Eviscerating black manhood to an audience that included black men was a dangerous step away from the shield of biblical authority that had so well protected her female contemporaries. Stewart, says Carla Peterson, committed a "fatal rhetorical miscalculation" that abruptly ended her lecturing career and necessitated an "obedient return to the rhetoric ... whereby God becomes the conduit" for female speech in the public sphere.²⁰ Nevertheless, Maria Stewart was, for a few short years, the heir apparent to David Walker's black nationalist agenda, a regular contributor to Garrison's white abolitionist agenda, and a stalwart missionary for the Christianizing agenda of the Second Great Awakening. While Stewart served as a public voice placing black women at the nexus of all three movements, there were a variety of private venues in which middle-class black women were asserting their literacy, religious conviction, and moral authority.

By 1830, African American literary societies provided a fast-growing medium for the distribution and discussion of pamphlets and lectures. The literary groups, often called debating or reading-room societies, were originated by black men who were frustrated by the racist exclusions and paternalistic attitudes of the few societies in the North that were integrated. However, within a few short years, the vast majority of the new societies were organized

by black women. For all groups, the primary agenda was to train future orators and leaders; to provide subscription libraries and increase literacy among undereducated blacks; and to provide a source of scholarly critique and a venue for publication. Philadelphia took the lead in establishing these societies as William Whipper, leading African American abolitionist and businessman, called for men not to sit as “idle spectators” but to actively engage and control the dissemination of information and literature in their own communities.²¹ Between 1828 and 1840, there were at least forty-two literary organizations, most of them female societies, in every major city between Washington, DC and Boston. By the mid-1840s, there were several additional groups formed in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit.²²

The influence of these societies on the free, black urban communities was far reaching. The female associations, in particular, played a major role in fundraising and provided significant support for several black newspapers, including the famous weekly formed later in the century, Frederick Douglass’s *The North Star* (1847–51). In general, the individual members of literary associations also had much influence on future generations. Henry Highland Garnet, for example, was an officer for the New York Garrison Literary Association, a male organization founded specifically to work with black youth, ages four to twenty. Furthermore, as a result of these associations, many blacks organized their own libraries in the early 1830s. Among them was David Ruggles, a printer and abolitionist in New York, who established a circulating library for a fee of less than 25 cents per month. In 1833, nine black men started the Philadelphia Library Company for Colored People and they applied to the legislature for incorporation in 1836. Five years later, the library had 600 volumes and 150 active members. By 1838, private, black libraries in Philadelphia held over 8,300 volumes.²³ As evidenced by almost all African American literature in the nineteenth century, free black communities felt strongly that literacy and morality were bound together in their quest for social equality.

Thus, it is not surprising that, as the emancipated population grew, the demand for efficient distribution of information increased. In 1830, there were just under 320,000 free blacks in the United States, with the vast majority of them residing in New England and the mid-Atlantic states.²⁴ Nowhere was the desire to write themselves into the social narrative of this country more evident than in the swift and strategic movement of private parlor discussions into the public domain of the press. After the two-year run of *Freedom’s Journal*, Charles B. Ray and Phillip A. Bell started a New York weekly, *The Colored American* (1837–42). A few years later, David Ruggles sporadically published

the New York magazine *Mirror of Liberty* (1839–40). Although some of the content of the press was local news, the editorials and public letters were most often about pressing national issues such as colonization and emigration. Finding themselves continually fighting to preserve what few rights they possessed, more than a few free blacks grew tired of waiting for the legislature to fulfill the promise of the originary documents of the United States. Determining that their American Dream would never come to fruition, some participated in organized colonization efforts and others chose independent emigration.

In response, all of the black newspapers of the period included vehement protests against colonization efforts that they perceived as forced displacement. Although Frederick Douglass and others did lend their support to emigration efforts formed by free blacks, most of the editorials and public letters were suspicious of abolitionist organizations whose end-goal, black removal from the United States, seemed identical to the desires of virulent racists and proslavery activists. In fact, Douglass had no tolerance for colonization efforts initiated and funded by white Americans – abolitionists or otherwise – and wrote vigorously against it. The black press implored its readers to recognize the economic strength of their own country and demanded that their readers should reap the benefits of what *they* had sown. In fact, the issue of colonization brought an end to *Freedom's Journal*; Samuel E. Cornish was a staunch advocate of integration and fighting for full citizenship rights, and John B. Russwurm, who wrote in support of colonization, eventually left for Liberia in 1829. Cornish retitled the paper *The Rights of All*, but it lasted less than a year. By midcentury, the distribution of protest pamphlets and petitions, the debates about political lectures among dozens of literary societies, and the formation of a black independent press all served to create public forums in which the new, black middle class would not simply engage but also shape and redirect national discourses on race, class, and gender.

Although the issues and the venues were primarily secular, it is not an overstatement to place the black church as the institutional base for the intellectual, political, and social movements of the black middle class. For free blacks in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was little separation between the domain of the church and more secular, social concerns. The pulpit was political and not confined within the walls of sacred buildings. The work to improve the economic and social conditions of black communities, free and enslaved, was a spiritual imperative. In the churches, at camp meetings, and at any cultural gatherings, black religious leaders often highlighted the sham of using Christianity to perpetuate racism. When David

Walker states in his *Appeal*, "I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing,"²⁵ he is drawing on a long-standing tradition of liberation theology that is at the heart of black literature.

The day in 1792 when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were told that they could not pray at the pulpit reserved for whites and were forcibly pulled up from their knees was a defining moment for black religiosity and black nationalism in the nineteenth century. By the 1820s, independent black churches of all denominations were being founded from New York to the Carolinas and slowly developing in the Midwest and Deep South. These fast-growing churches served as the cultural and political centers of the black communities, North and South. Beyond a slight few Quaker schools, these churches were the only source of public education for black children; the largest source of social welfare for the poor; and, most importantly, the only source of political power engendered entirely by free blacks without the paternal gaze of white abolitionists. It was the protective space of these churches that nourished the first uses of what Eddie Glaude calls "nation language" to express an ambivalent relationship to America.²⁶ It was not a coincidence that two preachers, Jones and Allen, walked petitions for abolition and social equality to the nation's capital (in Philadelphia 1790–1800) almost weekly. It was also not coincidental that a Methodist class leader, Denmark Vesey, planned the most extensive slave uprising in American history (suppressed in 1822) nor that a lay preacher, Nat Turner, planned the 1831 slave insurrection that killed fifty-five white people. In black communities, the church was, quite simply, *the* space for respite and resistance. The intertwined threads of religious, political, and social discourse emanated primarily from the church itself or the many secular clubs that were organized in church pews. As Du Bois would show us almost a century later in *The Negro Church* (1903), a report on antebellum black religion, the black church was not so much an activity or a place, but a movement.²⁷ According to Martin Delany's letter to Frederick Douglass, it was "among our people, generally ... the Alpha and Omega of all things."²⁸ For nineteenth-century free blacks, the confluence of the Second Great Awakening and the rise and spread of independent black churches served to create a sustained culture of theologically based resistance to oppression.

A large part of the religious fervor sweeping America was its fascination with the egalitarian principles of the Methodist evangelicals and their conviction that all men and women have equal access to God and spiritual salvation. While protesting the racist *practices* of their fellow white worshippers, black spiritualists embraced the denomination's *theory* of equality.

Between 1820 and 1850, two black women preachers published spiritual narratives and thus participated in transforming a very specific autobiographical genre that quickly proliferated and became one of the country's most popular for public consumption. For black women in particular, the spiritual autobiography offered a unique and powerful venue through which to articulate concerns about the soul of their country and to illustrate how and why women needed to be at the center of its social and political discourses. However, even white women activists and preachers were met with skepticism and often hostility. In her book *Woman's Record* (1853), Sarah Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, used Christianity as a tool to rebuke Lydia Maria Child for her abolitionist writing: "the precepts and examples of the Saviour should be the guide of woman's benevolent efforts. In no case did He lend aid or encouragement to the agitation of political questions."²⁹ Another antebellum author maintains that "whenever she ... goes out of this sphere to mingle in any of the greater public movements of the day, she is deserting the station which God and nature have assigned to her ... Home is her appropriate and appointed sphere of action."³⁰ Thus, in addition to battling racism, the black female writer of nineteenth-century narrative needed to reconcile the often conflicting codes of evangelical testimony and cultural conventions of what Barbara Welter defines as "True Womanhood."³¹

Jarena Lee's narrative, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself* (1836), makes a clear announcement that she has been called to preach, that she is a black female, and that she is a "lady." In the title and throughout the text, the narration of Lee's itinerant ministry during the 1820s and 1830s continually acknowledges the entanglements of race, class, and gender but skillfully negotiates Christian theology to authorize herself to undertake actions prohibited for slave-classed females: self-employment and freedom of movement. Just as Lee (1783–?) identifies herself as a "poor coloured female instrument,"³² Zilpha Elaw (c.1793–1873), another itinerant minister, asks "How can I be a mouth for God! – a poor, coloured female: and thou knowest we have many things to endure which others do not."³³ Elaw, who shared a pulpit with Lee on a few occasions, published *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* (1846). Like Elaw, Lee's memoir goes on to explain the exceptionalism of her life, and why she is positioned to critique the moral direction of her country:

As to the nature of uncommon impressions, which the reader cannot have noticed, and possibly sneered at in the course of these pages, they may be accounted for in this way: It is known that the blind have the sense of hearing in a manner much more acute than those who can see: also their sense of feeling is exceedingly fine, and is found to detect any roughness on the smoothest surface, where those who can see can find none. So it may be with such as I am.³⁴

Black women spiritualists, especially traveling ministers, were uniquely situated to see and assess the spiritual and social condition of African Americans, and they represented and defended their particular vantage points using a biblical armor as their shield against sexist criticism and racist violence. Like their predecessor Maria Stewart, Lee and Elaw both utilized biblical examples of preaching women to defend their right to preach, but always needed to be wary of stepping beyond the religious realm into the secular sphere. Scripture was a delicate and risky strategy for fighting a patriarchy so imbedded within the Christian practices of the nineteenth century.

Thus, in both the sacred and secular nonfiction of free blacks, the primary function of its prose was to explore and declare independence in language, whether it was oral or written, political or spiritual. Their constructions of independence, in all forms, were always complex gestures toward mastering one's own destiny. The same is true of the fiction; the poetry and drama of the period coded independence by its very existence.

Crafting their desire for independence in lyric forms, the black creative writers produced work that showcased their ability to participate in "high" culture rather than protest their exclusion from it. Unlike the prose of their contemporaries, the poetry and drama exemplified intelligence, morality, and literacy not through overt protest but rather with its appropriation of mainstream artistry. Their mastery of English, French, and classical art forms was a means through which to contribute to (and at times disrupt) the dominant discourses that had enslaved their ancestors and continued to exclude generations of free blacks. Thus, the work of these creative artists made a mockery of racism through mastery of culture and language.

Perhaps the best example of using the language of slavemasters to express one's equality is that of George Moses Horton (1791–1883). As the only American slave to publish a volume of poetry, he exemplifies yet another complexity of independent black literature, as the work was neither a slave narrative nor an abolitionist tract. Publishing his first book the same year as Walker's *Appeal*, Horton asserted himself into the American literary tradition

through verse. By pleading his own cause through rhyme and meter, Horton in his art participated in the sociopolitical discourses of equality and stood as a living and lyrical protest against his enslavement. After teaching himself to read while enslaved on a farm in Chatham, North Carolina, Horton began orally composing lyrics and poems that he would sell to UNC–Chapel Hill students in exchange for transcription. There began his reputation as the “Colored Bard of North Carolina.” Horton’s visibility increased after Caroline Lee Hentz, a famous proslavery novelist, transcribed his first book of poetry, *The Hope of Liberty, Containing a Number of Poetical Pieces* (1829). Horton was able to make enough money from his poetry and a variety of service jobs around campus to hire his time from his master and spent the next thirty years composing prolifically and launching futile attempts to gain his liberty. His second collection of poetry, *The Poetical Works of George Moses Horton*, was published in 1845, and he gave a public lecture, “The Stream of Liberty and Science” (1859) at Chapel Hill. Horton’s last published book, *Naked Genius* (1865), contains poems from his earlier volumes and new poems selected by William H. S. Banks, a Union captain Horton met toward the end of the Civil War. After emancipation, Horton moved to Philadelphia where he tried to publish another collection, *The Black Poet*, with the Banneker Institute, a racial uplift organization of young, black men. Their quick rejection, coupled with Horton’s increasing disillusionment with the slow social and economic progress of black Philadelphia, fueled his desire to leave the country. He ended his prolific career, not with a call to arms but with a call to leave. “Let Us Go: A Song for the Emigrant,” the last known writing of Horton, compares his land of nativity, “this place is nothing but a strife ... [and] We nothing have to show,” to Liberia “where milk and honey flow.”³⁵ Horton composed the poem while awaiting passage to Liberia, leaving his wife, children, and grandchildren behind. He joined two veterans from the United States Colored Troops, both disappointed with postwar life in the North, to form the “Lincoln Company” which raised funds for passage to Africa with the American Colonization Society. These three, together with twelve other expatriates, sailed for Liberia in 1866. The dynamics of Horton’s relationships with a racist, proslavery novelist, a Civil War captain, and a university president, all of whom were unsuccessful in their attempts to free him, get to the heart of the contradictory nature of the peculiar institution and individual responses to it. Horton’s enslaved “freedom” to compose poems instead of plowing fields typifies the paradoxical relationship of an *independence* being entirely *dependent* upon his mastery of the master’s language.

Given the vexed relationship between literacy and enslavement, it is interesting that the major poets of the period were all in the South, most of them Francophone writers from Louisiana. Voicing their own pleas in the context of the French Revolution, rather than the American Revolution, these Louisiana poets broaden our understanding of language and literary traditions between 1820 and 1845. As one of many transatlantic cultures created by the African slave trade, free black Creoles in New Orleans were moving beyond mimicking the French romantic poetry that was the fashion. Their poetry, composed in French, declared linguistic and cultural independence from both countries that had enslaved their ancestors. Ignoring the *Code Noir* which banned published works by free people of color in Louisiana, they produced poetry, short fiction, and drama that reflected everything from the horrific vestiges of slavery to the sociopolitical exigencies of black and bi-racial citizens who had been free for generations. In 1837, Victor Séjour (1817–74), an African American expatriate in Paris, published his short story *Le Mulâtre*, a scathing critique of the legacies of enslavement: miscegenation, rape, and murder. He later wrote the ode “Le Retour de Napoléon” (1841) which was published in Armand Lanusse’s *Les Cenelles: choix de poésies indigènes* (1845), the first African American anthology of poetry, along with eighty-one other poems. Before *Les Cenelles*, Lanusse co-edited *L’Album littéraire, journal des jeunes gens, amateurs de la littérature* (1843). This short-lived, interracial monthly journal was discontinued after accusations of its incendiary content. Although the poets in *Les Cenelles* were necessarily less revolutionary than the anonymous contributors to *L’Album*, Lanusse always considered the primary function of his art to be an educative and empowering shield against racism.

In similar fashion, the drama of William Henry Brown and his first black acting ensemble is a testament to the appropriation of European art forms as a plea for racial equality. By bringing London theater culture to New York, Brown reclaimed canonical English literature as his own, bringing yet another intercontinental voice into the national, sociopolitical discourses of race. As part of the international, multiracial growth of the city, Brown’s African Grove Theatre and Company began as an ice-cream garden for black society and quickly morphed into a Shakespearean troupe that was good enough to become irksome to their white rival theatres. By 1822, the company was staging *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. Brown then expanded their repertoire to include *Tom and Jerry: or Life in London* (1826), a contemporary satire by William Moncrieff. The play had opened the same year at the Park Theatre but Brown’s version was altered to include a Charleston slave-market scene with a white actor playing the auctioneer.³⁶ He also produced a

Native American drama, *Pizarro* (1799) by Richard Sheridan, and *Obi; or Three-Fingered Jack* (1804), a slave insurrection play, and he was the first to stage *She Would Be a Soldier; or The Plains of Chippewa* (1819), by a Native American playwright. Brown's theater not only reflected the indigenous and African Diaspora but also boasted an integrated orchestra and audience, making him "America's first multiculturalist in a new nation determined to define itself as a white man's country."³⁷

In the end, Brown's reach may have been too inclusive, when he produced his own play, *The Drama of King Shotaway* (June 20–21, 1823). The first drama written by an African American, *Shotaway* was based on the Carav slave insurrection of St. Vincent. In the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (1849), Aldridge recalls that "certain Yankees, with a degree of illiberality peculiar to some liberals had no intention of such indulgences being allowed to Negroes."³⁸ This was the last play performed by Brown's Company, but the brief notoriety began a brilliant stage career for Ira Aldridge in London and opened the door for Shakespeare's appearance in black literature. For black creative writers later in the century, "Shakespeare's function as a symbol of elite achievement and insurgent behavior allowed them to creatively appropriate his texts, demonstrate the writers' cultural literacy, and lay claim to Shakespeare as a literary ancestor; Shakespeare [signified] their ascension to full-fledged citizenship."³⁹ Although his Shakespearean stage was certainly a declaration of cultural literacy, Brown's portrayal of slave auctions and his decision to dramatize a slave insurrection called attention to the curtain of slavery behind his independent stage. Through its productions of English and Native American plays, the African Grove Theatre and Company laid claim to a multiracial literary heritage, challenged antebellum notions of race, and asserted its freedom to define its own artistic purview.

By the middle of the century, the independent literature of African Americans offered a steady proliferation of artistic expression. More often than not, it was an urgent and direct challenge to the state of the union. The emerging forms of literature expressed the burdens of those who were less-than-citizens in a nation to which they had contributed so much. Either directly or indirectly, the writing was meant to bear witness to the cultural literacy, moral strength, and viable independence of free black communities. Even while acknowledging their commitments to abolition, the fight was to break the bonds of being slave-classed. As Charles Reason urges in "The Spirit Voice" (1841), "To vow, no more to sleep, till raised and freed/From partial bondage, to a life indeed."⁴⁰

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 575.
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29. Sarah Buell Hale, *Woman's Record; or, Sketches of all Distinguished Women, from The Creation to A.D. 1850. Arranged in Four Eras with Selections from Authoresses of Each Era* (New York: Harper and Brother, 1853), p. 620.
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31. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151–174; 151.
32. William L. Andrews (ed.), *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 37.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
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“We wish to Plead our own Cause”:
independent antebellum African
American literature, 1840–1865

JOYCELYN MOODY

Despite the miscellany of restrictions hindering the freedoms of persons of African descent in antebellum United States, the oral and print texts produced by blacks between 1840 and 1865 comprise an *independent* literature, following from earlier black revolutionaries' exigent insistence that “We wish to Plead our own Cause.” Mid-nineteenth-century African American texts declare an independence from traditional genres and familiar conventions of white Americans' national and ethnocentric literatures, even as they draw on the rhetorical structures of those literatures, to privilege black vernacular expressivity. One of the leading venues for the dissemination of black print culture was the midcentury black independent press, intrepid offspring of *Freedom's Journal* and the other earliest newspapers in the country begun by African American entrepreneurial radicals and/or devoted to the spirited articulation of black concerns. During the antebellum years, the independent black press announced its freedom from corseted description in the very range of the character and temperament of its various weekly and monthly broadsides and papers: from emigrationist to anticolonizationist; separatist, nationalist, and defiant; masculinist but not exclusively male; sometimes protofeminist; religious or secular by turn and need. Often, the names blazoned on their mastheads heralded their self-authorizing and autonomous disposition: in the 1840s, the *Mystery* (founded by Martin R. Delany, 1843–48); W.A. Hodges's *Ram's Horn* (1847–50); Frederick Douglass's *North Star* (1847–51), original source of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, which expanded into the *Liberty Party Paper* (1851–63); the *Provincial Freedman* (1853–57); the African Methodist Episcopal Church's still active *Christian Recorder*; and by the end of the Civil War, the *Afro-American Magazine* (1859–65) and the *Weekly Anglo-African* (1861–62).

The range of purpose in these papers confounds interpretations, then and since, of a unified black community, a solid black bloc. This myth of a singular and unified black cultural expressivity may be nowhere more clearly exposed as fallacious than in the multifarious texts emerging from the struggle of antebellum women of African descent for a gendered independence beyond patriarchal constraints. Rejecting the masculinist rhetoric of the black independent press, many free(d) black women at midcentury resisted being caught in print as in life in the stranglehold of a black male hegemony. Moreover, the multivalent black expressivity of both men and women is matched by a brilliance of articulation of purpose and a correlative (sometimes spontaneous) sense of play. That synthesis of clear identity and rhetorical subversion characterizes virtually all black texts of the era. Conceiving of *texts* in broad and expansive terms, rather than confined to a single genre or mode, we find remarkably different texts characterized by a common consciously ironical fusion of forms that, even when earnestly conveying serious and direful ideas, imaginatively signify (on) resistance to modes of expression adopted by the dominant society. Black antebellum authors of every persuasion – orators, journalists, singers, preachers, poets, slave narrators, insurrectionists, actors, court witnesses, and court jesters – called attention to their dexterous manipulation of independent discursive acts, coupled over and over with an explicit willingness, if not indulgence, to expose and reverse hegemonic exploitations of black performativity and to turn an increasing white appropriation of black rhetorical forms back on itself.

Perhaps most significantly, antebellum black authors refused to focus their expressive acts exclusively on chattel slavery, and instead authorized their technicolored conceptualizations of “literature” as capacious enough to divine, construct, and reify a range of free black identities. Nonetheless, virtually all of their texts embraced the fight against slavery as moral duty to other blacks, and many protested vigorously against slavery as the most heinous curtailment of black humanity in a virulent system of legalized impediments to black citizenship and self-determination.

Perhaps the notion of a “free black identity” is a phenomenon ever subject to change; perhaps what frees it from fixity is its very variability across US history and academic investigations of that history. Until recently, literary scholars and social historians maintained that African American writers were compelled to wrestle with constructions of blackness and Africanity produced by white abolitionists and proslavery advocates alike. To have their own perspectives heard and engaged, we used to assert, early black authors had to negotiate nonblacks’ points of view and their attitudes toward black life

even when, or especially because, they were determined to resist racialized oppression and to participate in the abolition of slavery. For example, in the preface to essays on *The Slave's Narrative* (1984), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., poses this rhetorical question: "where in the history of narration does there exist a literature that was propelled by the Enlightenment demand that a 'race' place itself on the Great Chain of Being primarily through the exigencies of print?"¹ More recent scholarly investigations and methodologies (many ensuing from the explorations in Gates's groundbreaking co-edited collection) enable us to revise this view so as to reconceptualize creative output by blacks before emancipation as more than a collective response to an external call to situate "the race" on a vertical legend of human worth.

Current scholarship on early black expressivity usefully interrogates the extent to which antebellum US black authors did not necessarily concede or engage, much less succumb to, representations of themselves constructed by others. At the end of the twentieth century, for example, Nell I. Painter cogently demonstrated that, in the 1850s, Sojourner Truth (c.1797–1883) countered the stereotypical versions of her persona published by at least four white women who promoted her image (viz., Olive Gilbert, Frances Dana Gage, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frances Titus): Truth staged and purchased – and staged *for* purchase – her professional portrait photographs as *cartes de visite* and cabinet cards that she herself arranged.² As noted by scholars such as John Ernest,³ DoVeanna Fulton,⁴ Harryette Mullen,⁵ and Painter, of course, Truth's miniature portraits, along with her oral resistance as she both collaborated on print accounts of her life and spoke from public platforms, illustrate that she did not simply navigate or circumvent the racist modes whites proffered for the representation of her identity and experience. Rather, the *cartes de visite*, the political speeches, the folksy Christian cautions, the collaborative (auto) biographies, and so on, all indicate her successful independent assertion of what Ernest has called a "fluid" identity of her own construction, on her own terms, in defiance of the strictures ostensibly controlling her self-portraiture. In Painter's words, "Sojourner Truth used language – spoken and printed – as self-fashioning ... [and] she used photography to embody and to empower herself, to present the images of herself that *she* wanted remembered."⁶ To say that Truth and other midcentury antebellum African Americans succumbed to a black identity constructed for them by whites – whether well intentioned, antislavery, or antiabolitionistic – is to deny what black feminist scholars have variously identified as a black resistant orality. I use this particular phrase to refer to blacks' subversive testimony dictated to print-literate interlocutors. More broadly, black resistant orality is part of an African American expressive

tradition that asserts the black self – verbally or otherwise performatively – with autonomy and authority. A black resistant orator performs the self through signifyin(g) and multiple discourses; she or he exerts an independent spirit deliberately if also indirectly in ways that overturn, or undermine, the primacy of print culture.

In precisely this spirit, blacks navigated a craggy discursive terrain in telling their own truths about antebellum black experience, chiefly about slavery. In recent decades, scholars such as Dwight McBride in *Impossible Witnesses* have examined the transatlantic and transnational debates deployed by abolitionists as well as proslavery advocates, to laud these rhetorical strategies.⁷ For numerous reasons that have been well documented, especially in William L. Andrews's seminal studies, avowals of black "truth" fell on deaf white ears in the middle of the nineteenth century unless it conformed to ideas that whites were predisposed to accept or ideas that whites failed to recognize as ventriloquized versions of their own notions. Conversely, free black discourse seems fully aware that, as McBride demonstrates, truth may be understood "as always a production, a process, a political operation" and those only effective in constructing it pay assiduous attention "to the rhetorical strategies enacted to produce truth."⁸ Recently, in short, scholars have effectively contended that, for the most part, antebellum blacks acknowledged but discounted hegemonic readers' expectations of black reiterations of reality. Those African Americans insisted on the assertion of a self-defined blackness along with black identities of their own creation.

An acrimonious debate in the summer of 1852 between Mary Ann Shadd (1823–93) and Henry and Mary Bibb after Shadd both received money from the American Missionary Association (AMA) and published her *Plea for Emigration or Notes of Canada West*, as recorded in scholarly accounts by Shirley Yee, Jane Rhodes, and others, evinces the freedom with which some blacks had the means and the daring to air dirty black laundry. Although both Shadd and the Bibbs would have understood the danger that their public display of intraracial rancor could pose for all blacks, they apparently nonetheless felt the risk of white observation and exploitation of their public dispute worth the engagement, thus illustrating their faith in the righteousness of an assertion of a black identity verbally stalwart and rhetorically sophisticated as well as impassioned and intemperate.

White onlookers to the Shadd–Bibb intraracial debacle would have included AMA leader George Whipple and other AMA members, key players in the conflict since in part it revolved around Shadd's efforts to apply (very limited) AMA funds to opening a racially integrated school in Windsor. The

Bibbs, who advocated separate education for blacks and whites, had nonetheless encouraged Shadd's alliance with the AMA. Significantly, Henry Bibb had earlier joined the AMA, and he supported its mission to Christianize fugitive slaves and provide them with bibles.

While still on amicable terms with one another, the Bibbs also urged Shadd not to disclose her grant or salary to prospective black students of her school, presumably so as not to discourage these blacks' financial support. In mid-summer that year, however, in what Shadd regarded as a betrayal, the Bibbs used their newspaper (Canada's first black paper), the *Voice of the Fugitive*, to reveal the grant and salary amounts that Shadd received from the AMA and, consequently, to register a near-ruinous attack on her reputation and career.

From this dispute emerged a new black newspaper, for Shadd realized that her responses to the Bibbs (chiefly, oral retorts and exculpatory correspondence to the AMA) were no match for their power as editors. A freeborn outspoken activist for emigration and integration, Shadd secured financial backing from Samuel Ringgold Ward (1817–c.1866) and, with him, cofounded the Windsor-based *Provincial Freedman*. Although the Bibbs were ex-slave separatists with a patriarchal bent, they ironically shared Shadd's commitment to black self-actualization but did not endorse her revolt against confining social codes that engineered and maintained race segregation (and separate gender spheres) in the USA. All three disputants were US expatriates and black nationalists, and educators and editors as well. But the fallout over Shadd's publication of *A Plea* and her connections to the AMA clearly exposes the twentieth-century nationalist fantasy of a singular, unified black cultural expressivity and nineteenth-century black women's particular survivalist need to unveil the myth in their own time. In addition, the unique origins of the *Provincial Freedman* indicate blacks' gradual awareness of the importance of an independent black press, perhaps ideally comprised, moreover, of rival papers.

As Shadd's biographer, Rhodes analyzes the historical import of the *Provincial Freedman*, whose four-year run (1853–57) rendered it one of the longest-lived among antebellum African American newspapers. Rhodes specifies two chief reasons that black papers floundered: lack of capital due to limited advertising, and low literacy rates among African Americans, the targeted reading audience. Although some did try to attract white subscribers and patrons, according to Rhodes, early black newspapers' antislavery rhetoric and their commitment to autonomous self-representation discouraged a white readership, even among white abolitionists. Difficulties in securing advertising and a small free black readership heightened competition among

black newspapers. Rhodes cites gender conflicts as a third hindrance to the longevity of early black serials: black masculinism. Although co-owned by a black woman–black man team, the *Provincial Freedman* served as a site of gendered contention in that Henry Bibb (and other black male editors and newspaper owners) resented Shadd for openly competing with him as a journalist.⁹

The Canadian newspapers debate in 1852 illuminates the importance of the independent black press on both sides of the US northern border as a forum available to blacks before abolition in 1865, after which they could and did pursue literacy on a larger scale. The value of serial publications to abolitionist-era community building is inestimable; as Ernest has stated, “the format and regularity of newspapers and magazines emphasized the daily vigilance and activism required for eventual emancipation.”¹⁰ Underscoring the wide diversity of contributors and thus the breadth of perspectives on literature, politics, culture, and religion published in nineteenth-century black periodicals, Elizabeth McHenry notes in *Forgotten Readers*, as one pair of contrasts, in 1859 the *Anglo-African Magazine* published both the Martin R. Delany novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, and the Frances Ellen Watkins Harper short story “The Two Offers,” perhaps the oldest extant text of the genre by an African American.¹¹ The morally suspect nature of fiction discouraged some early US papers from including chapters of novels and advertisements for fictional works in their pages.¹² Although the putative immorality of fiction often occasioned its ill repute among Christians, early black newspapers emphasized the inclusion of fiction as a source of moral, religious, and political edification for nineteenth-century readers. So, it is not altogether surprising that the AME Church’s *Christian Recorder* became the publication site of imaginative texts such as Harper’s 1850s temperance fictions that underscored the importance of blacks’ conformity to codes of proper moral and social decorum.

Contemporaneous with Delany and Harper, William Wells Brown wrote a letter to William Lloyd Garrison – (white) editor of *The Liberator* – to announce the 1853 publication of his novel *Clotel*. Such a grand gesture of authorial independence and self-promotion was not uncommon for Brown, and it became customary for black imaginative writers of a slave past that was still quite present-day. The longest-running abolitionist newspaper and well-heeled with white wealth, Garrison’s *Liberator* flavored its accounts of black life to meet the tastes of a largely white readership.¹³ (Brown must have steeled himself as he solicited Garrison’s announcement of *Clotel* in *The Liberator*.)

As for Brown's black novelist colleagues Harper and Delany, McHenry describes them in *Forgotten Readers* as "represent[ing] two extremes in their aesthetic beliefs and social politics; like other authors who published in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, the *Repository*, and the *Christian Recorder*, both found an audience for their diverse agendas."¹⁴ After these antebellum fictions, between February and September of 1865, Julia C. Collins (?–1865) serially published one of the very first novels by a black woman, *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*, in sequential numbers of the *Christian Recorder*. An award-winning special issue of *African American Review* (40.4, 2006) explores various aspects of Collins's *Curse*, and essays by both William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun (who in 2006 also co-edited the first bound volume of the serial novel), as well as by Veta Smith Tucker, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Leslie W. Lewis, Rafia Zafar, and others examine *Curse* from diverse angles and/or ruminate on the debate as to whether it was Collins or Harriet E. Wilson, author of *Our Nig* (1859), who is rightly honored as the first woman of African descent to publish a novel. One finds numerous rhetorical and biographical contrasts between Harper and Collins, and their respective tales share many characteristics and tropes.

Still, Harper and Collins arguably differ as much from each other as both differ from Delany and Brown, so their contemporary readers would have encountered distinct fictional styles in their respective texts. It bears considering who was a "reader" in early nineteenth-century America. McHenry persuasively defines *readers* as persons exhibiting a range of literacy and/or listening skills while engaged in literary activity, from those "individuals who read [a] text to themselves and never extended the distribution of [black papers] by reading it aloud to someone without literacy skills"¹⁵ to groups of Northern, primarily urban free(d) or fugitive blacks who gathered as societies in Masonic halls, private homes, and church settings, to hear papers read aloud, to debate their content, to draft letters to editors, and to develop literary character and political authority in spite of racist oppression, for collective, communal, and personal reform.¹⁶ That abolitionist publications, especially newspapers and broadsides, were central to African Americans' collective commitment to self-fulfillment is apparent in their steady rise in popularity between 1850 and 1860. According to Augusta Rohrbach, this period marked "a 100 percent increase in abolitionist publications" and – not coincidentally – "is seen as the golden age of slave narrative publication."¹⁷

Less didactic than the earliest black papers begun in the 1820s (viz., *Freedom's Journal* and the *Mirror of Liberty*), the *Provincial Freedman* and the *Voice of the Fugitive* assumed their readers were heirs of, and well-versed

in, the cultural and civic work of the independent black press.¹⁸ The respective proprietor-editors, then, played out their conflict before readers astute about numerous differences, subtle and overt, between Shadd and the Bibbs. The split between the parties was exacerbated by their respective histories: though unmonied, Shadd had been born into relative privilege in the US North; the Bibbs were ex-slaves who wondered whether blacks who lacked an eye-witness experience of slavery did not lack as well the authority to serve as I-witness for blacks in bondage. Shadd had no use for black “caste” churches or schools, and repeatedly argued that racial integration would force whites to recognize and respect black humanity,¹⁹ perhaps because she had been educated among Quakers in Delaware during her childhood. Taught, in contrast, by the demon slavery, the Bibbs had little use for whites, period. Perhaps ironically, the intraracial debate between Shadd and the Bibbs led to the development of Shadd’s friendship with yet another leading African American newspaper person, Martin R. Delany, founder and editor of the *Mystery* (in Pittsburgh 1843), which in 1848 he would sell to the AME Church, who in turn transformed it into the *Christian Recorder*, a paper still in print. In fact, although Shadd manipulated in her favor Anglo-oriented conventions of true womanhood on the one hand, and shunned Afrocentric black masculinism on the other hand, her biographer reports that Shadd’s “closest political allies and defenders were influential men, including Douglass, Delany, William Still, and Samuel Ringgold Ward,” co-proprietor of the *Provincial Freedman*.²⁰ Virtually all intraracial and interracial conflicts of the era were enacted in the independent black press as the most effective commodity and institution of the era for broadcasting news and sharing opinions.

In *Fugitive Vision*, Michael Chaney illustrates ways that African Americans fused nonprint black expressive forms together with serials and other modes of print culture to amplify the attention paid to important, possibly pivotal events, especially involving the institution of slavery. The fusion of literature and orature stood to increase the audience that black authors and texts about blacks would reach. Chaney’s discussion of a polyvocal response to Hiram Powers’s statue “The Greek Slave,” designed to suggest enslaved womanhood, was part of the American exhibit in the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, London, and provides a pertinent example. Led by William Wells Brown, the episode also involved other American fugitives, including William and Ellen Craft, the married couple who had famously fled slavery with William “disguised” as a captive slave and Ellen masquerading in masculine drag as his infirm slave master. In particular, a letter in the June 26, 1851 number of *The Liberator* from William Farmer, reported to *The Liberator* that

"Brown and his company first drew a crowd of interspersed [American] spectators near [Powers's] statue by openly discussing its resemblance to 'The Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Powers' 'Greek Slave'" – an illustration by John Tenniel that Chaney reports had appeared in *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*.²¹ Chaney's introduction to *Fugitive Vision* outlines ways that "the visible slave of torture is always shadowed by the feminine."²²

Unable to stimulate the outrage he seeks through his interracial company and its choreographed discussion, Brown dramatically sets the *Punch* cartoon beside Powers's statue, as if to make literal the cartoon's "intended" function as "companion" to the sculpture. Chaney remarks that, "combined with Brown's performative act of placing it directly beside its satirical object, the illustration becomes part of a multivalent assault on the very way that blackness and slavery are put on display – or fail to be properly displayed."²³

The incident at the British Crystal Palace conjoins the visual and material culture objects of (1) Powers's statue and (2) the *Punch* cartoon satirizing it; the oral and corporeal performance of (3) Brown's (ultimately failed) attempt to stage a conversation that contrasts "The Greek Slave" with "The Virginian Slave"; the linguistic texts of (4) the verbal caption amplifying the *Punch* cartoon and (5) Farmer's letter reprinted as (6) a *Liberator* article.²⁴ Notably, each of these rhetorical acts at once centers and decenters the figure of the black female body on which Powers's statue is putatively based; in addition, the six constructs render us six times removed from any corporeal body of an enslaved woman on whom each of these expressive forms was based. Moreover, Brown's performative juxtaposition of the cartoon with the statue is as linguistic as it is theatrical, since Brown apparently expects his spectators both to gaze on the cartoon *and* to read its attendant caption. To appreciate fully Brown's satirical signifying on Powers's sculpture and slavery's violation of enslaved black bodies that the statue at once unveils and disguises, particularly women's bodies, viewers must access both the linguistic and the visual narratives of Tenniel's cartoon in *Punch* and at the site of the Crystal Palace Exhibition. In Brown's final, embodied gesture, then, emerges a seventh remove from the enslaved female body to illustrate, ironically, another instance of multivalent independent black expressivity.

Among recent, celebrated interpenetrations of visual and verbal texts is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, specifically the narrative moment when Stamp Paid shares with Paul D the graphic image – perhaps a line drawing – of Sethe, cut from a newspaper account of her criminal trial (or rather, newspaper accounts of the infamous infanticide trials of Margaret Garner in 1856 Kentucky). Morrison writes: "Paul D slid the clipping out from under

Stamp's palm. The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No ... Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear."²⁵ Thus Morrison imbricates issues of (il) literacy and knowledge, visuality and criminality.

Examining newspaper and pamphlet accounts of highly publicized court cases, Jeannine DeLombard's *Slavery on Trial* takes up some of the same concerns as Chaney's *Fugitive Vision*. DeLombard investigates the inextricability of nineteenth-century African American print and nonprint cultures, which helped to circulate news especially of adversarial trials, and, in the process, to educate readers about strategies for interpreting them. Print culture's explicit instruction in how readers should resist, protest, celebrate, and approximate legal judgments – literally, how to herald and promulgate them – depended on journalists' studied imbrication of written news accounts of significant cases with the manuscript briefs, print documents, and various oral transmissions that ranged from defendant and plaintiff testimonies, their lawyers' commentaries, judges' decisions, and extratextual performances such as courtroom laughter, jurors' outbursts, and spectator applause.²⁶ DeLombard cogently argues that the abolitionist press, including the independent black press, saw to it that court cases were not confined to the insides of courtrooms, particularly after the very public libel trial in 1830 featuring William Lloyd Garrison, proprietor of *The Liberator*. Indeed, "Garrison published his own pamphlet on the criminal case, *A Brief Sketch of the Trial of William Lloyd Garrison, for an Alleged Libel on Francis Todd, of Massachusetts*;²⁷ unsurprisingly, the enterprising Garrison cashed in on his case by printing an enlarged edition of his pamphlet in 1834. DeLombard meticulously reports that, seventeen years later, the saga was not yet over, as "Baltimore printer William Woody issued a rebuttal to Garrison's aspersions on the Maryland judiciary" by publishing his own thirty-two-page, anonymously authored *Proceedings against William Lloyd Garrison, for a Libel in 1847*.²⁸

In short, court trials summarily provided a means by which popular serials could pursue verdicts in the court of popular opinion as an alternative source of justice. As DeLombard demonstrates, "each of the era's highly publicized trials became a synecdoche for the larger debate over slavery, in which readers were expected carefully to review the testimony of slaves and slaveholders, to follow the arguments of both abolitionists and defenders of slavery, and, finally, to render a verdict that would not only reverse the decisions reached by the nation's atrocious judges but, more importantly, put an end to the crime of slavery."²⁹

An open letter published in the independent black press on the successful lawsuit filed by Henry Box Brown (1815–?) suggests the far reaches of DeLombard's insights into the polyvocality achieved by free(d) blacks' convergence of literary and cultural modes. In the same year that Shadd and the Bibbs were battling out their disparate views on black self-determination in Canadian print venues, several editorials by T.H. Brindley in the *Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Herald* resulted in Brown's 1852 libel suit against the British paper.³⁰ As noted in John Ernest's 2008 edition of *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (1851), the August 27, 1852 number of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* includes a letter from Jonas Pekel about Brown's libel suit, dated ten days earlier at New York. Pekel writes:

I read yesterday an account of the evil workings of some cotton-ocracy [*sic*] or slave-driver of the South, using his influence in England (at a place called Wolverhampton) to write down the panorama now being exhibited here by Henry Box Brown, representing it to be an exaggeration of the evil of slavery. But I was happy to find that a jury of my native country did not think so, and awarded Brown a verdict of \$500 against the libeler.³¹

In other words, contrary to persistent popular oversimplification (based on British North American colonial rule, in fact), black people could and did testify in antebellum US courts, against whites as well as for and against other blacks. To begin to illustrate: Loren Schweninger's *The Southern Debate over Slavery*, vol. 1: *Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1778–1864* (2001) and vol. 2: *Petitions to Southern County Courts, 1775–1867* (2008) provide details about *thousands* of petitions filed by slaves, slavers, and antislavery advocates between the American Revolution and the Civil War related to slavery alone. Moreover, details of early US legal cases involving blacks are accessible today not only through judiciary archives from the nineteenth century, but also through numerous other discourses and modes in which they were carefully and consciously transcribed, including such slave narratives as the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*; newspaper and broadside accounts of the more notorious cases (such as the 1834 scandal centered on Robert Matthews and his Matthias cult); political orations responding to landmark cases, such as Frederick Douglass's speech on the *Dred Scott* Decision in 1857 (as well as his critique of constitutional laws in his landmark 1852 Fourth of July oration at Rochester); and novels from the era (as well as such late twentieth-century fictive interpretations as Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, which uses the figure of a pregnant fugitive slave woman sentenced to execution for the murder of whites to refute *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by both Thomas Gray in 1831 and William Styron in 1969).

In her analysis of court cases in which Sojourner Truth was a party, DeLombard dispels myths about African Americans' political location outside the US judiciary. Truth was still Isabella Van Wagenen when she successfully petitioned a post-emancipation New York court in 1827–28 to mandate the return of her son Peter, who had been illegally sold south to Alabama. Truth secured some of the legal defense for the Kingdom of Matthias, in the fraud and assault cases that Robert Matthews faced in the 1830s. In a related subsequent case charging Truth herself with slander, Truth also won. Significantly, DeLombard quotes the Kingdom of Matthias as reporting that, "Despite the recorded case pleading, *Isabella Van Wagenen v. Benjamin H. Folger*, 'the records for the Supreme Court sittings in New York City and Albany show no evidence of the case actually coming to judgment.'"³² Regardless, Truth felt so triumphant about her legal cases that she continued to use the courts during Reconstruction to sue for damages after she was forced from public transportation.

Truth's intervention in the early 1830s US legal system to preserve her reputation even before she changed her name from Isabella Van Wagenen to Sojourner Truth – that is, before she changed her public identity from state-emancipated slave woman to itinerant evangelist – challenges the prevailing view of Northern antebellum blacks as scarcely freer than their enslaved counterparts in the South. While Southern colonial law had indeed proscribed black participation in the law, by the middle of the nineteenth century African Americans like Truth were using the court system to challenge the ethics of slavery and individual judges' rulings via newspapers as popular tribunal. Not all black women had this recourse, especially not enslaved women. As Christina Accomando demonstrates, the subject of Melton McLaurin's 1991 legal history *Celia, a Slave* has been doubly silenced in the historical record. First, during her 1855 murder trial she could and did testify in the Missouri case, but not against Richard Newman, her owner and the murder victim in the case. In addition, Accomando argues, McLaurin's account of the court case again silences Celia (1835–55) in the twentieth century.³³

Truth was not compelled to rely exclusively on (white women) writers to shape her public persona in the 1850s: she augmented that rhetorical persona with print coverage of her speeches and highly stylized photographs and cabinet cards. By pursuing the inclusion of details of her various legal battles (primarily for right to access on public conveyances) in the accounts of her life on which she collaborated and by encouraging print coverage of these court cases, Truth not only participated in the crafting of her public image; she also manipulated the variety of resources available to the construction of

a multivalent if not altogether autonomous self-representation. In this way, the formerly enslaved woman recuperated for herself and other African Americans the notion of an independent black cultural voice.

During the same period that Truth worked to revise (or alternately, to elide) white public conceptions of black women, Elleanor Eldridge (1784–1865), a freeborn woman of African and indigenous ancestry, was involved in a series of lawsuits to reclaim her extensive real estate property in Providence, Rhode Island: *Carter v. Eldridge* in May 1835; her trespass case *Eldridge v. Balch* in January 1837; and the overturning of the latter in her favor in May 1839. While few of the details of her court cases are recounted in either *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* or *Elleanor's Second Book*, the biographical narratives by Frances Whipple on which Eldridge collaborated in 1838 and 1839 respectively, both narratives were repeatedly published until 1847 for the explicit reason of earning money to fund the lawsuits and to sustain the plaintiff afterward. Eldridge had been orphaned, then indentured, as a child. She applied her artisan skill and business savvy to become one of the most successful women entrepreneurs in Rhode Island by her thirty-eighth year. In fact, Xiomara Santamarina has proclaimed that Eldridge was “the richest African American woman in Rhode Island” in her day.³⁴ With enviable wealth and local renown, Eldridge purchased abundant property in Providence, leading Rohrbach to call it a “real estate empire.”³⁵ On her land, she built and rented houses as an additional source of revenue. The property was summarily sold in 1831 for far less than its worth by an auctioneer, her neighbor Benjamin Balch, and a local sheriff named William Brayton Mann.³⁶ According to Santamarina, in Eldridge’s absence, Balch and Mann sold “one of Eldridge’s houses worth \$4,300 for \$1,500.”³⁷ During the sale, Eldridge was convalescing from typhus fever in Adams, Massachusetts. Ironically, the theft of her property came in the immediate aftermath of Rhode Island’s gradual emancipation of slavery.

As literary protest against the abridgment of black and indigenous rights, the *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* defends the subject’s right to own real estate property. Targeted to middle-class white women readers, the *Memoirs* and *Elleanor's Second Book* were successful cross-racial collaborations that enabled Eldridge “to raise large sums of cash and buy back her property in the middle of the economic panic of 1837.”³⁸ The *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* departs from the autobiographical narratives of its subject’s enslaved, fugitive, and free(d) sisters ironically by celebrating her *paid* labor as *voluntarily* performed. Indeed, she often freely selected her clients and the tasks she fulfilled for them.

Its economic success notwithstanding, the *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* and *Elleanor's Second Book* anticipate many of the same rhetorical compromises

apparent in life narratives later dictated by black women to white, short-comings *and* resolutions well documented by Mandziuk and Fitch.³⁹ The resistant orality one discerns in the *Memoirs* intimates that Eldridge was a black speaking subject no less skillful or dexterous than, say, Sojourner Truth at the articulation of a distinct black voice and an independent black female subjectivity.

Print culture and familial property (and family as property) emerge as central issues in the self-authored ex-slave narrative of Lucy Delaney (c.1830–c.1890s), published after Reconstruction but focused on black women's experiences in antebellum USA, in particular Delaney's own and those of her mother, Polly Wash Crockett. *From the Darkness Cometh the Light* (c.1891) incorporates many details of both women's lives in 1840s St. Louis, details also embedded in their legal petitions. After Polly Wash secured her own freedom in court trials from 1842 to 1844, she returned to the courts in winter 1844 and gained her daughter Lucy's freedom, thereby overturning the intent of the infamous proclamation that "the child shall follow the condition of the mother." Having examined "The Freedom Suits of Polly Wash and Lucy Ann Delaney," Eric Gardner reports: "Delaney actually filed *two* suits tied to questions of her enslavement (one discussed in her narrative, and one not discussed at all)."⁴⁰ His speculation that, "Like most freedom suits, it [Wash's trial] received no newspaper coverage and probably excited little attention outside of those directly involved"⁴¹ would seem to contradict claims like mine, here, that antebellum African Americans developed a multivalent identity by disseminating details of court cases in a variety of venues. However, one finds that Delaney's inclusion of details of her trial renders her narrative polyvocal and, moreover, illustrates DeLombard's contention that important trials could not be contained within courtrooms. Among reasons they spilled over were that literate blacks often used legal cases to educate readers of print objects about judicial proceedings, to strengthen through training blacks' individual and communal powers of rhetoric and debate, and to bring black public opinion at once independent and collective to bear on major cases.

Besides her eponymous protagonist's legal troubles and work history, the biographer of the *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* also narrates Eldridge's familial and romantic relations. For these episodes, Whipple combines tropes of women's sentimental fiction and slave narrative traditions. Among the most fascinating features of the *Memoirs* is an extraordinary frontispiece, a portrait of the biographical subject as (apparently) willing worker (read wage earner). This image of Eldridge with a broom relates to other antebellum visual

representations of authors and/or (auto)biographical subjects in the form of woodcut images, engravings, or photographs. Notably, as Santamarina asserts, "This singular woodcut is perhaps the earliest positive depiction of an African American working woman."⁴² Eldridge's frontispiece differs significantly from other images of nineteenth-century black women – all of them rare, few of them positive. One need only recall the Zealey daguerrotypes of Delia and Renty, enslaved women in South Carolina whose images were exhibited as ethnography for Harvard University's Louis Aggassiz's research. Both *The Life and Religious Experiences of Mrs. Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady* (1836), and the expanded version published as *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee ... Written by Herself* (1849), for example, are prefaced with a portrait of the author in conventional white bonnet and shawl. The titles of spiritual autobiographies by Jarena Lee (1783–?) insinuate if not the author's own preoccupation with marital and class status, then her awareness of their importance to her prospective readers. No doubt she included the portrait in part to complement her repeated verbal insistence that she was a "true woman" – and not, as her detractors frequently charged, "a man dressed in female clothes." Lee's portrait differs from Eldridge's also in that the former establishes Lee as an intellectual worker, an author in fact, by surrounding the writing and thinking figure with inkwell and books clearly marked as *Dictionary* and *Bible*, thus compounding her femininity and piety with literacy and erudition. (The frontispiece of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects*, published more than seventy years earlier in 1773, portrays Wheatley in pious, modest dress and seated next to books, and thus functions like Lee's to signify her literacy.) The contents of Lee's spiritual autobiographies – conventional details of traditional itinerant ministers' journals of miles traveled, sermons preached, souls saved, tracts sold, and other such statistics – demonstrate her efficacy as a minister, and in the process, then, they legitimate her work outside the home – and her consequent homelessness.

Its differences from Lee's aside, however, Eldridge's image connects her story to such visual-textual culture artifacts of the era as political cartoons, handbills, newspaper advertisements, print ephemera, and other paratexts. Specifically among black texts, Rohrbach has observed that "Six out of ten slave narratives published in the United States between 1845 and 1870 provided a portrait of the author as a frontispiece," presumably to validate both the black subject's actual existence and her African ancestry.⁴³ (In Eldridge's case, the portrait can be read as further authenticating her female gender identity.) While such "proof of blackness" apparently betrays a subjugated black identity, at the same time its deployment suggests the antithesis as well: African

Americans could and did exploit whites' obsession with the ostensible validity of an African phenotype (as the "genuine article"), in effect selling race as they pursued a black financial independence. As Rohrbach argues, the author's "use of publishing as a means of gaining revenue and the inclusion of a portrait to support the enterprise makes a convincing case for race as a significant market lure."⁴⁴ Whipple and Eldridge's decision to reprint the woodcut in every edition of Eldridge's life story reveals their investment in the return to independence that successful sales could yield. Eldridge was not alone among black or Native American women entrepreneurs in the antebellum North, the majority of whom "ran gender-based businesses in domestic manufacturing (of soaps and medicines, for example) or in cooking and laundry,"⁴⁵ but she and Lee were rare among women of color who closed the gender gap to work in traditionally male occupations like wallpaper hanging and itinerant preaching. Thus, although she apparently lacked sufficient literacy to inscribe her experiences without Whipple's aid, Eldridge illustrates early black women's lucrative pursuit of independence in an environment hostile to their success.

Whereas the author portrait represented a microcosm of individual black independence and self-actualization, the antebellum panorama offered an expansive view of the modern USA. According to Chaney, "Typical panoramic views rarely focused on bodies, preferring sweeping historic battles, faraway landscapes, and sundry wonders of the modern and ancient world to representation of the individuated human form."⁴⁶ In 1849, however, the consummate showman Henry Box Brown shifted the panorama *sans* human being to a profitable abolitionist portrait of slavery. Ernest describes its details as manifested in its Boston premiere in 1850: "The panorama, *Henry Box Brown's Mirror of Slavery*, was a series of paintings on a sheet of canvas reported to be 50,000 feet long that would be gradually unwound to reveal successive scenes related to Brown's personal experience and to the history of slavery and the slave trade."⁴⁷ Ernest reports that, while living in England, Brown also reenacted his escape, complete with a parade, a band, and star-spangled banners. Unsurprisingly, a revised version of Brown's slave narrative centered on the "songs and stories he related on the public stage."⁴⁸ Ernest's concise description of Henry Box Brown's exploitation of the various expressive forms he used to tell his experiences of slavery demonstrates the intersectionality, intertextuality, and self-determination of black independent acts, especially vis-à-vis slavery. Summarily, Brown's autobiographical performances syncretically spanned (a) visual narratives in the forms of painting, banners, and his extravagant panorama; (b) verbal texts/print culture, including his written account of the episode and the words on the banners; (c) his "Hymn of

Thanksgiving” and other songs; (d) the orature of his staged storytelling in England; and (e) the embodied reenactment of his dangerous escape via a crate shipped over land from Richmond to Philadelphia. As early as 1849, the same year that he mailed himself into Philadelphia freedom, Brown had begun maximizing the multivocality of his “Hymn of Thanksgiving,” the song he had legendarily burst into on emerging from the mailed box. His public appearances on the US abolitionist circuit had “included a printed version of the song he regularly sang at those meetings, illustrated with an ‘Engraving of the Box.’”⁴⁹ So, even before the success of his panorama, the former bondman had turned his singular “Hymn” into dramatic spectacle, print culture, and visual and material artifact as well as public performance.

Future scholarship would do well to investigate intersections of orature and literature, particularly as nineteenth-century blacks did not distinguish between these modes and their genres to the extent that whites generally did. In the development of independent black discourses, folklore and other black vernacular forms become enmeshed in other contexts, as in the familiar example of the explication of spirituals in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In addition, Douglass’s essay on Christianity appended to the 1845 *Narrative* illustrates one way that the orature of sermons and religious texts becomes manifested in the print literature of slavery. More than one scholar has observed the rhetorical pay-off of Douglass’s access in his youth to the *Columbian Orator*. Moreover, as DeLombard observes about Sojourner Truth’s lawsuits and impromptu sermons alike, “testifying” and “witnessing,” two terms affiliated with both legal courts and church congregations, reference the “rhetorical power from black vernacular linguistic and religious practices” that connect spontaneous authoritative speech to intense personal experience.⁵⁰ Among the better-known texts that work on multiple levels as abolitionist lectures, other oratorical calls for civil rights and women’s rights, speeches and political orations is an 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” by Henry Highland Garnet.

One finds the assertion of an independent black discourse, autonomous and self-actualizing, in a broad spectrum of abolitionist propaganda, spiritual autobiography, religious pamphlets, spirituals and secular songs, journalism, editorials, published or open “private” correspondence, gift books, and advice books produced by blacks. Indeed, one bookend of the period addressed in this chapter, 1840–65, might be read as the poem “Advice to Young Ladies,” by Ann Plato (?–?) in her *Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry*, an 1841 collection of *belles-lettres* essays, literary criticism, and biographical sketches. In a bibliographical essay on Plato in *Invisible Poets*, Joan

R. Sherman references the introduction to *Essays* by James W. C. Pennington (1807–70), pastor of the Colored Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, in which Pennington praises Plato, writing “My authoress is a colored lady, a member of my church, of pleasing piety and modest worth.”⁵¹ Subsequently, he compares Plato to Phillis Wheatley, also acclaimed for her modesty and piety; both women used literature to advise other (black) women. At the opposite end of the period under study, Julia C. Collins’s 1860s columns in the *Christian Recorder* likewise offered counsel on black womanly decorum and pride.

Perhaps the *Anglo-African* (August 20, 1864: 1–2) transcription of a speech delivered by Harriet Jacobs “At L’Ouverture Hospital, Alexandria” (Virginia) can incisively conclude these observations and speculations about the multivalence of antebellum African Americans’ strivings for independent self-representation. Jacobs spoke on August 1, 1864, during a ceremony to commemorate the British West India Emancipation as well as the Ninth Army’s Colored Division, which had just been renamed the L’Ouverture Division, and the medical staff of the Colored Hospital, recently renamed the L’Ouverture Hospital.⁵² “Mrs. Jacobs” was the first of six different speakers; none of the others was a woman.⁵³ Succinct and somber, her eloquent speech is a model of the era’s metatextuality and metahistoriography. For Jacobs self-consciously names the ceremony itself a commemoration of the magnitude of the events it commemorates; she stresses that the ceremony is both history in the making and history-making. As Lewis Perry asserts, her “emphasis was on human effort,”⁵⁴ and with it, she exalts black independence; she honors the achievements of African American soldiers and their contributions to the Civil War, and assures her audience that black women will care for those black soldiers who return from battle. That is, implicitly Jacobs lauds black soldiers’ and black women’s defiance of negative stereotypes proliferated by proslavery advocates and racist whites. By illustrating “issues concerning emancipation, citizenship, historical memory, and women’s public responsibilities at a crucial moment of change,”⁵⁵ Jacobs characteristically looks past the whites before her to praise independent black acts of self-determination.

Notes

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4. DoVeanna S. Fulton, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
5. Harryette Mullen, "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Our Nig, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Beloved*," in Shirley Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 244–264.
6. Painter, "Representing Truth," p. 462.
7. Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionists, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), *passim*.
8. Quoted in Sandra Burr, Review of *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionists, and Slave Testimony*, by Dwight A. McBride, *African American Review* 37.1 (2003): 150–152; 151.
9. Jane Rhodes, "Race, Money, Politics, and the Antebellum Black Press," *Journalism History* 20.3–4 (1994): 95–106.
10. Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, p. 278.
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12. Augusta Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Race, Realism, and the U.S. Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–27.
14. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, p. 131.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
17. Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, p. 16.
18. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, pp. 115–116.
19. Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 14.
20. Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 50.
21. Michael Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 54; p. xiv.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
25. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* [1987] (New York: Vintage, 2004), p. 183.
26. Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 30–31.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
30. John Ernest (ed.), *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* [1851] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) p. 176.
31. *Ibid.* pp. 158–159.

32. Quoted in DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, pp. 242–243 n15.
33. Christina Accomando, *The Regulation of Robbers: Legal Fictions of Slavery and Resistance* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), pp. 134–135.
34. Xiomara Santamarina, *Beloved Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 12.
35. Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, p. 40.
36. Dorothy Sterling (ed.), *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 37. Jennifer D. Brody and Sharon P. Holland, “An/Other Case of New England Underwriting: Negotiating Race and Property in *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*,” in Sharon P. Holland and Tiya Miles (eds.), *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 31–56; p. 37.
37. Xiomara Santamarina, “Elleanor Eldridge,” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Elizabeth Higginbotham (eds.), *African American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 167–169; p. 168.
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40. Eric Gardner, “‘You have no business to whip me’: The Freedom Suits of Polly Wash and Lucy Ann Delaney,” *African American Review* 41.1 (2007): 33–50; 33.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
42. Santamarina, *Beloved Professions*, p. 9.
43. Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, p. 31.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
45. Santamarina, *Beloved Professions*, p. 104.
46. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision*, p. 113.
47. Ernest, *Henry Box Brown*, pp. 5–6.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
50. DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, p. 72.
51. Quoted in Joan Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 33.
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54. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
55. *Ibid.*

Racial ideologies in theory and practice:
political and cultural nationalism,
1865–1910

WARREN J. CARSON

The years following the conclusion of the Civil War and extending to the initial rumblings of what would come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance, roughly 1865–1910, can perhaps be characterized by the Dickensian binary opposition “The best of times, the worst of times.” The euphoria and celebratory mood associated with the end of the Civil War was soon interrupted by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, but was recaptured, though not without continued vigilance and hard work, by the subsequent ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution in 1865, 1868, and 1870 respectively. In addition, the Freedmen’s Bureau, organized immediately following the conclusion of the war, was charged with attending to the immediate needs of the newly freed slaves, many of whom did not have the wherewithal to supply themselves with the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. The Bureau met with some success, but the organization under the leadership of former Union Army General O. O. Howard had its share of detractors who prevented it from completing its mission.

Indeed, freedom and its exercise by millions of African Americans who had been previously enslaved took on many different forms, from presiding over confiscated lands of former slaveholders, and free movement to other geographical locations, to freely participating in constitutional conventions and the electoral process that enabled a number of African Americans to hold public offices. The period of Reconstruction seemed to confirm for African Americans that America would at long last make good on its promise of freedom and equality for all people.

As W. E. B. Du Bois points out in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in addition to exercising the vote, newly freed African Americans were intent upon

educating themselves and their children as a means of taking full advantage of their American citizenship and its freedoms. Thus, adding to Wilberforce and Lincoln Universities, located in Ohio and Pennsylvania respectively, that had been founded prior to Emancipation, African Americans began immediately to establish educational institutions throughout the South and to petition for others to be established under the auspices of state governments. As a result, approximately seventy-five schools and colleges were founded during the Reconstruction period and the years following. Many such schools were supported by the various church denominations, in particular the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, and Baptist churches. In addition, the American Missionary Association (AMA), founded in 1839, was instrumental in founding a number of schools, and several state legislatures also allocated funds for the establishment of schools for African Americans. Many of these institutions, by necessity, included various levels of instruction and high school departments, designed to address illiteracy. Although some were called "universities," novelist Sutton Griggs observes that they were scarcely more than "normal school[s] with a college department attached."¹ Preparation for teaching, training for the Christian ministry, and the skilled trades were principal curricula. Indeed, the nature and direction of black education formed one of the crucial divisions in black thought and educational policy and practice well into the twentieth century.²

Culturally and socially, many African Americans experienced their independence through the formation of churches, civic clubs and organizations, fraternal and uplift societies, and accepted conventional middle-class ideals. In part this was tied to the belief in the need to prove themselves worthy of white acceptance, especially in those states that comprised the former Confederacy. As they would soon discover, however, such acceptance would not be found to any appreciable degree in the North. In the meantime, a majority of the African Americans who remained in the South continued to live in standard conditions, finding no real way to sustain or support their daily lives.

Even so, African Americans did register some cultural and social successes. In music, the Negro spirituals were brought to the attention of the world through the efforts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and similar college choirs from Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes. Through the music of the Jubilee Singers, the Negro spiritual became recognized as an original American music form and one of its cultural gems. African American writers of the period paid tribute to the spirituals, for example in the "The Sorrow Songs" from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and James Weldon Johnson's most well known poem "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1908). In popular music, Scott Joplin brought

ragtime to a national audience; James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson produced show tunes and included early blues forms in their work; and the noted African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote a musical comedy titled *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898). In the more classical dimension, both Joplin and Dunbar wrote operas. Although these strands of black music popularity were begun in the post-Emancipation period, they would not reach full flowering until the twentieth century. Along with music came dance, including a wide range of African inspired dances, and even though the minstrel tradition brought African Americans face to face with a number of grotesque and demeaning stereotypes, oftentimes African Americans were able to turn back such images on those who had more sinister and uncharitable intentions through such portrayals.

Writers of the period had relatively little access to mainstream outlets for publishing their works; thus, as Long and Collier point out, "[b]y far the major form of literature [in this period] was the essay,"³ the largest number of which were either historical or political in nature. Most had to rely upon black newspapers, the larger of which generally were published in major cities like New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Richmond, and had national circulations. By 1890, there were 154 black papers, according to black press historian I. Garland Penn.⁴ Editorial opinions varied widely, however, and became even more pronounced after the surfacing of the philosophical differences between Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963); thus, editors often would not print works that did not agree with a particular editorial direction or philosophy. Opinions differed not only on the kind of education African Americans should pursue, but on whether blacks should migrate to the North or remain in the South, or whether they should recolonize Africa or organize their own black state within the United States. These and other polarizing views came to a head shortly after the turn of the twentieth century in the Washington/Du Bois Controversy. Because works by black writers were not in great mainstream demand and because there was little acknowledgment of the legitimacy of black writing (and would not be until the Harlem Renaissance), the major publishing houses were not interested in publishing them. Therefore, many works by black writers were self-published through independent presses, often with funds raised from friends and supporters. The larger religious denominations, the AME Church and the Baptist Church in particular, established their own publishing concerns that necessarily made space available for creative writers, advocates of moral improvement, or religious and educational uplift. Among these, the *Christian Recorder*, established by the AME Church in 1852, continued to publish

poems, essays, and stories by a number of African American writers, including Frederick Douglass, Frances E. W. Harper, A. A. Whitman, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Similarly, Sutton E. Griggs, through his connection with the Baptist publishing concern in Nashville, Tennessee, enjoyed access to that denomination's press, although he self-published his first novel in 1899 and later established his own publishing concern, Orion Publishing Company in Nashville. In a singular bold move for a black woman of her time, New England's Pauline E. Hopkins established her own book publishing company for the purpose of getting works by black writers, her own included, into print. In addition, Hopkins served as editor of the *Colored American Magazine* during the early years of its publication. The magazine was published in Boston from 1900 until 1909, and in her role as editor Hopkins sought to publish works by African Americans, largely for African American consumption.⁵

Two exceptions, however, are significant. After his early books *Oak and Ivy* (1893) and *Majors and Minors* (1895) gained some national attention, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) began to have easier access to the publishers. Likewise, after the considerable success of his first story, "The Goophered Grapevine," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* of August 1887, Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858–1932) also enjoyed a measure of success with a major publisher, Houghton Mifflin. Most African American writers would continue to struggle to publish their works. White publishers would not seek them out in significant numbers until the next century.

Whatever progress African Americans made in politics, education, economics, and culture was halted by the abrupt end of Reconstruction as a result of what Du Bois refers to as "the Revolution of 1876"⁶ that occurred with the brokered election of President Rutherford B. Hayes and the subsequent removal of federal troops from the Southern states that made possible the reestablishment of the antebellum status quo in the South. The backlash and reversal of African American progress was so brutal and so severe that historian Rayford W. Logan terms the post-Reconstruction years from 1877 to 1901 "the Nadir"⁷ in African American life and history. Logan further interjects that such a dark period in the history of African Americans was brought about by "The Betrayal of the Negro," as he aptly titles his historical study of the period 1877–1901. The South moved swiftly to accomplish a redemption of their statehouses by "the suppression of the Negro vote"⁸ brought about by implementing poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests, and underscored by the intimidation tactics of the Ku Klux Klan and other white vigilante groups. Similarly, Jim Crow laws, whose

implementation began in the 1870s, effectively reversed social and economic progress. In addition, lynching, principally of black men, escalated especially during the 1890s, so that by the time of Booker T. Washington's "Speech at the Atlanta Exposition" in 1895, black men had been almost completely disenfranchised, their push toward social equality turned back, and the meager gains made during twelve years of Reconstruction effectively checked if not altogether diminished.

Against the backdrop of these troubling times, a mixed chorus of black voices arose in various degrees of protest. Frederick Douglass, the stalwart spokesperson for the dignity of black manhood, continued to lift his voice as the nation struggled to determine its course in the aftermath of the Civil War, vigorously challenging President Andrew Johnson and the Republican Party to enact appropriate legislation that would guarantee citizenship and universal manhood suffrage to the newly freed slaves. Though Douglass desired to retire from public life and enjoy freedom, he realized that "there would be little chance of improving the conditions of the freedmen until they became citizens,"⁹ and he threw his energy and influence into making sure the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were ratified. In a speech made in Elmira, New York in 1880, Douglass bemoaned the short-lived significance of these amendments and laid the blame for their failure at the feet of those who acted out of expediency rather than genuine concern for the welfare of America's newest citizens. In 1881, Douglass published the third version of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which, according to Philip Foner, "represents the synthesis of his life's experience."¹⁰ Douglass continued to serve his country and speak forcefully on issues important to black America until his death in 1895.

In the vein of protest, an extension of the tradition that included Douglass, novelist Sutton E. Griggs (1872–1933) offered the voice of Black Nationalism in his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, published in 1899. Griggs was a product of the post-Reconstruction South and saw serious limitations in Washington's twin policies of accommodation and conciliation, so much so that Griggs answered the call to join Du Bois's Niagara Movement in 1905. As a Baptist minister, educated at Bishop College in Dallas, Texas and Virginia Union Theological Seminary, Griggs was well aware of the virtue of humility, but he was more aware that African Americans could not allow themselves to be further trampled by whites while in pursuit of their civil rights. With *Imperium in Imperio*, which critic Bernard Bell calls "the most thematically radical Afro-American novel of the nineteenth century,"¹¹ Griggs joins the national conversation on the matter of the best option for African Americans to exercise in

the long-standing debate over the Negro Question. In the novel, two opposing viewpoints are represented: Bernard Belgrade advocates that African Americans plot to take over the state of Texas and make it an all black state, while Belton Piedmont appeals to a more gradual, conciliatory approach by first seeking to educate whites about the humanity of African Americans and then graduating to more militant measures if whites are not persuaded by the earlier appeal. In the context of the debate between the two opposing forces, Griggs also examines the necessity of education for African American achievement; the shortcomings of African American leadership, especially those leaders who are merely self-serving; and the negative effects of color politics among African Americans. Also, Griggs weaves into his narrative important factual elements, such as the lynching of a black postmaster in Lake City, South Carolina, that gives the novel additional credibility as a work of realism. When Belton Piedmont's execution is ordered by the secret society of Imperium in Imperio at the novel's conclusion, one of the other characters notes, "When he fell, the spirit of conservatism in the Negro race, fell with him."¹² In addition to *Imperium*, Griggs wrote and published four additional novels: *Overshadowed* (1901); *Unfettered* (1902); *The Hindered Hand* (1905); and *Pointing the Way* (1908). While the four subsequent works did not advocate a separate black state, they were clear political statements about black self-determination. Interestingly enough, toward the end of his life, Griggs had moved to more of an integrationist position on the race question.

In poetry, a comparable militant voice can be found in the long poems of Albery Allson Whitman (1851–1901). Whitman, also a Southerner, was born in Kentucky and educated at Wilberforce University in Ohio. He became a minister in the AME Church and served several congregations. Whitman insisted on the dignity of black manhood, a prominent theme in *Not a Man, Yet a Man* (1877). However, it is in his long poetic rendering of the Seminole Wars, *The Rape of Florida, or Twasinta's Seminoles* (1885) that Whitman offers his most militant stance. Like *Not a Man, Yet a Man*, *The Rape of Florida* contrasts the heroism of the Seminole Indians and their African American allies with the treachery of whites. Whitman's heroes are those for whom the expression of manliness is a distinct virtue, as seen in the lines "His deeds of love and valor for him won/The envied wreath by heroes only worn,/And which from manhood's brow oppression ne'er hath torn!"¹³ While Whitman's poetic craft is often weak and contrived, the poems do stand as important works in the ongoing protest against racial oppression in America.

Members of the clergy joined forces with the rest of black America; their voices spoke a diversity of opinions as well. In addition to thousands of

sermons delivered throughout the country on any given Sunday, a number of notable ministers made influential speeches and wrote provocative essays. Joining the fiery Baptist Sutton Griggs and the often militant Albery Whitman, AME bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834–1915), a former legislator during Reconstruction, advocated a Back-to-Africa platform during the height of the post-Reconstruction backlash, having become convinced that African Americans were better off elsewhere than in America. Episcopal bishop Alexander Crummell (1819–98), a former missionary in Liberia, “advocated pride in the African heritage,”¹⁴ the elevation of black womanhood, and the absolute necessity of education, founding the American Negro Academy in 1897. Similarly, Princeton-educated Francis J. Grimke, the renowned ex-slave and Presbyterian minister, argued for the rights of all and joined with Bishop Crummell in the creation of the American Negro Academy. Founded in 1897, the Negro Academy was “a national organization whose members included some of the best educated and most prominent of the black elite.”¹⁵ Through annual meetings, various symposia, and academic papers, the members of the Negro Academy sought to counter the frequent charge that African Americans had not contributed anything to the intellectual standing of the world. Of these Academy members, Bishop Crummell stands out as a significant religious voice of the era.

Crummell was born in New York in 1819 and faced a number of challenges to obtain an education, ordination, and a charge where he could work unhindered by the politics of race. In his youth, he was forced to leave a school in New Hampshire where local residents dragged one of the school buildings into a swamp to protest Crummell’s attendance there. A priest at the age of twenty-three, Crummell was offered a church, but was not allowed to sit in the church convention because he was black. These and other indignities Crummell faced with characteristic strength and resilience, never compromising his blackness or his manhood. W. E. B. Du Bois praised these traits in a moving tribute to Bishop Crummell that he included in *The Souls of Black Folk*. His disenchantment with America sent Crummell to England, where he studied at Cambridge and received a bachelor’s degree in 1853. For the next twenty years, Crummell worked as a missionary in Liberia before returning to the United States. Crummell’s writing is characterized by full thought and careful preparation. While he is noted for his sermons, Crummell spoke and wrote on a number of important topics. “The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs,” for example, he delivered to the Freeman’s Aid Society in 1883. Crummell begins by acknowledging the 1880s as indeed the woman’s era and that American women have shown superiority to women in

every other culture of the globe. He quickly notes, however, that “the one grand exception to this general superiority of women [is] *the black woman of the South*.”¹⁶ Crummell describes the Southern black woman as “an intellectual starveling,” that she is “thrown into the companionship of coarse and ignorant men,” and had “lived in the rudest huts, and partook of the coarsest food, and dressed in the scantiest garb, and slept, in multitudinous cabins, upon the hardest boards.” Discussing in great detail “the state of black womanhood,” Crummell then appeals to his audience to counter the degradation of “one of the most interesting of all the classes of women on the globe” by using their educational, religious, and financial resources to produce “the uplifted and cultivated black woman of the South.”¹⁷ The renowned educator and feminist Anna Julia Cooper extended this argument and appeal three years later.

Another dimension of Crummell’s thinking is seen in the essay “The Attitude of the American Mind toward the Negro Intellect” (1898). Anticipating Du Bois’s idea of the Talented Tenth, Crummell calls for a Negro Academy to counter a “repellant ... forbidding attitude of the American mind” toward the intellectual needs of African Americans. Crummell argues that white Americans look at African Americans with an attitude of “cheapness” in every aspect of their lives: “And so, cheapness is to be the rule in the future, as well for his higher, as for his lower life – cheap wages and cheap food, cheap and rotten huts; cheap and dilapidated schools; cheap and stinted weeks of schooling; cheap meeting houses for worship; cheap and ignorant ministers; cheap theological training; and now, cheap learning, culture, and civilization.” Crummell called for a reversal of this cheapness with an organization of the best black scholars in the country so that the black man might “recognize and ... foster the talent and capacity of his own race, and to strive to put that capacity and talent to use for the race.”¹⁸ Thus, Crummell became a founding member of the Negro Academy just a year before his death in 1898. According to John Hope Franklin, the Academy members’ “great hope was that these ‘trained and scholarly men’ would take the lead in shaping and directing ‘the opinions and habits of the crude masses,’ while at the same time defending African Americans from the assaults of those who despised them.”¹⁹ Against charges like those made by James Parton in the *North American Review* for November–December 1878 that “To this present hour the negro has contributed nothing to the intellectual resources of man,”²⁰ the Negro Academy led the intellectual response of African American scholars and intellectuals for well over a quarter century.

Other voices were raised in protest. Callie House (1861–1928), a veritable voice crying in the wilderness, led the effort to secure reparations – repayment

for their work in building a nation – for hundreds of ex-slaves whose labor went uncompensated, unrewarded, and unappreciated. A Nashville washer-woman, House was an officer in the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, and had only a basic education, but her energy and fearlessness gained considerable momentum for the reparations movement that “enrolled at least 34,000 members between July 1897 and April 1899.”²¹ Almost from the beginning, the movement came under close scrutiny from the US government: the Post Office Department charged fraud against the Association and singled out House for her individual activities. House fought back, and, according to her biographer Mary Frances Berry, her “defiant response offered a sharp contrast to the non-threatening demeanor whites expected from blacks.”²² House, who was often ridiculed by her own people, kept up the good fight and spent time in jail for her activities. While she was never successful in securing reparations, she was nevertheless a voice to be reckoned with and a forerunner to the contemporary reparations movement.

Journalists, too, added their voices in varying forms of protest. In addition to publishing the works of other black writers in their newspapers, editors like T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age* and William Monroe Trotter of the *Boston Guardian* frequently weighed in on matters of the day and just as frequently offered their support for the positions of either Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. Du Bois. One of the most significant journalistic voices of the time was Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), a Memphis schoolteacher-turned-journalist, found herself at the forefront of the protest against lynching. A fearless crusader, her messages, whether spoken or written, were strident and impatient. Like House, Wells-Barnett often found herself fighting against her own people for a place at the leadership table. Born the year before the Emancipation Proclamation, Wells-Barnett refused to compromise the dignity of African Americans. In her mid-twenties, she was forcibly removed from a train for refusing to relocate to the Jim Crow car. She sued the train company and won, but the Tennessee state court later overturned the decision. After she assumed the editorship of the *Free Speech and Headlight*, a black newspaper that circulated in Memphis and the surrounding area, Wells-Barnett became an outspoken critic of lynching. One of her fiercest editorials on the subject, published on May 21, 1892, in which she attacked “the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women,”²³ resulted in her newspaper offices being destroyed. At the time, Wells-Barnett was out of town, but she elected not to return to Memphis for fear of her life. A subsequent editorial, published in the June 25, 1892 edition of the *New York Age*, was, according to Wells-Barnett’s biographer Paula

Giddings, “the first comprehensive study of the practice [of lynching] that spoke to its true motives, meanings, and how it reflected not the moral failings of blacks but that of a culture gripped by white supremacy.”²⁴ In other words, with “The Truth about Lynching,” Wells-Barnett was determined “to set the record right.”²⁵ A careful researcher, she knew she had to have her facts straight so that she could make the strongest possible case against lynching. Also, her writing is characterized by a straightforwardness as suits her purpose and audience. Probably her most provocative piece, a pamphlet titled *A Red Record*, appeared in 1895. According to novelist John Edgar Wideman, *A Red Record* was “one of the first published accounts of lynching episodes in this country.”²⁶ An investigative report that draws on her earlier anti-lynching editorials, it is factually precise and very pointed in tone and intent; as such, it prefigured the lynching investigations conducted by Walter White in the next century. *A Red Record* catalogs the lynchings that had been reported in the white press for the previous two-year period, 1893–94. Wells-Barnett was especially interested in further setting the record straight about the reasons for lynching, laying the blame at the feet of the white men of the South whose false chivalry she scoffed at on more than one occasion. It is important to note that *A Red Record* appeared in 1895, the same year as Washington’s “Speech at the Atlanta Exposition,” and it is remarkable in its contrast to Washington’s notion of the status of African Americans in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A strong critic of Washington’s policies, Wells-Barnett also saw limitations in Du Bois’s integrationist views. She was, nonetheless, one of the participants in W. E. B. Du Bois’s Niagara Movement in 1905 and the subsequent founding of the NAACP in 1909. Although she was also active in the Women’s Club movement, organizing several such clubs herself, it is for her work as a crusader against lynching that she is best known.

A number of other female voices joined the chorus of those advocating equality, dignity, and uplift for African Americans during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, well-known poet, essayist, and activist, published her first novel, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, in 1892. Through the title character, the author explores the effects of the triple oppression of race, class, and gender on black women that became a critical site for black women writers and activists well into the twentieth century and beyond. For many years, *Iola Leroy* was believed to be the first novel published by an African American female. Though it has been supplanted by Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), *Iola Leroy* is clearly the most significant work of the post-Reconstruction. Harper’s narrative traverses the antebellum period, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and

beyond, and focuses on how many forces sought to undermine and otherwise prevent black women from living free, unfettered lives. Having lived through all of these periods and as a writer and activist for African American and women's rights for a half century by the time of the novel's publication, she could draw easily on historical facts to make the novel realistic. The central character reflects Harper's own interests as she argues for the elevation of black women. Like many black novels of the period, *Iola Leroy* sought to correct inaccuracies regarding black life in the antebellum period as portrayed by white writers of the plantation school. In addition, Harper offers substantial criticism of the condition of African Americans during the period of Reconstruction, and, as noted by Bernard Bell, *Iola Leroy* "continues the pattern of abolitionist novels but introduces a more complex though melodramatic image of mulatto women, the black family, and the roles blacks played in liberating themselves."²⁷ Also during the decade of the 1890s appeared the novels by Amelia Johnson (1858–1922), *Clarence and Corrine, or God's Way* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894); Emma Dunham Kelley (1863–1934), *Megda* (1891) and *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898); and the short stories of Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935) published in *Violets and Other Tales* (1895) and *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* (1899). These addressed many of the triple issues of race, sex, and class in a similar vein. It is important to note that Kelley's identity as an African American has recently come under debate. Further, *Four Girls at Cottage City* focuses on white characters rather than black.

Author and publisher Pauline E. Hopkins (1859–1936) offered a less genteel response to the issues of black inequality and the undignified treatment extended particularly to black women, in her novel *Contending Forces* (1900). Much like *Iola Leroy*, Hopkins uses the characters and situations to challenge misrepresentations of African Americans by white writers in an effort to correct the negative images of black women, particularly the portrayals of looseness and lack of chastity popularized in the literature of the Plantation School. Hopkins used her later serialized works, the "magazine novels," to continue her crusade against the damaging effects of the flagrant misrepresentations of black women. These include *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice*, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest*, and *Of One Blood, or the Hidden Self*, all published serially between 1900 and 1904.

Perhaps the most significant female voice of the period was Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964). *A Voice from the South* (1892) set the tone for women's education, uplift activities, and dignified, gracious living that characterized

these endeavors for the black women of her generation. Born in North Carolina prior to Emancipation, Cooper attended St. Augustine's Normal School in Raleigh, NC, and later Oberlin College, before embarking upon a long and distinguished career as teacher and principal, initially at Wilberforce University in Ohio and St. Augustine's College in North Carolina. In 1887, Cooper began a long tenure as teacher at the M Street School in Washington, DC (later renamed Dunbar High School in honor of Paul Laurence Dunbar), where she became principal in 1902. *A Voice from the South* is a collection of speeches and essays that Cooper had made previously in which she set forth her views on the concept of true womanhood and racial uplift as they applied to African American women of her era. The principal speech included in the volume, titled "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," originally delivered in 1886, is an astute catalog of how womanhood in general had been undermined historically by the church and the feudal system, despite the role that women had played in providing energy and stability for the world through the ages. This fact Cooper argues as the essence of her feminist tract, drawing the logical conclusion that "It seems not too much to say then of the vitalizing, regenerating, and progressive influence of womanhood on the civilization of to-day."²⁸ Turning her attention to the particular plight of the African American woman, Cooper acknowledges that the case for the elevation and uplift for the black women of the South had already been made by Bishop Alexander Crummell three years earlier in 1883, and she adds her own voice to the cause of education, uplift, and protection of black women. Just as women in general have served civilization, Cooper notes, black women have a particular role in determining the future of the black race: "Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman*," a statement that she underscores with her often quoted observation, "Only the Black Woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'"²⁹ Although Cooper's education began at a normal school, she received her collegiate education at Oberlin and presided over perhaps the most elite school for African Americans during her time. Very much a member of the Talented Tenth, Cooper was active in the Women's Club Movement of the late nineteenth century and in the first Pan African Convention in 1900. In addition, she was a staunch Episcopalian and often critical of "the rank exuberance and often ludicrous demonstrativeness" of black religious expression. In demonstration of her

firm belief that education had the power to transform lives, she earned her doctorate from the University of Paris in 1925. A brilliant thinker with a broad intellect, Cooper was clearly one of her era's best and brightest of any gender and any race. Her writing is characterized by an elegant prose style that is highly allusive and clearly intended for intellectual audiences.

Just as the period itself represented a wide disparity of experience regarding America's newest official citizens, the two voices that spoke most loudly represented often-opposing philosophies and viewpoints. The accommodationist stance advocated by Booker T. Washington was vigorously contested by the more radical protest of W. E. B. Du Bois. Indeed, the Washington/Du Bois Controversy, or the Washington/Du Bois Debate, came to characterize the latter part of the period, dividing African Americans and whites into two philosophical camps well into the twentieth century. Booker T. Washington's meteoric rise to the rank of the spokesman for African Americans may have seemed unlikely to some, although, like many who were born in slavery, he took advantage of the promise of America. Born in Virginia in 1858 or 1859 to a slave mother, who served as the plantation cook, and a white man from a neighboring plantation, Washington left for West Virginia with his family after Emancipation. He worked in the salt and coal mining industries, but, like many newly freed slaves, believed that somehow an education would open the doors of a new world for him. Alternating night and day classes with the brutal work of the mines may have been a daunting routine for some, but Washington took it all in his stride. After hearing of educational opportunities provided by the recently opened Hampton Institute in Virginia, Washington resolved to attend, walking the 500 miles from Malden, West Virginia to Hampton. He discovered that he would have to prove himself in order to be admitted to Hampton, and did so, marking the first of a number of accomplishments where the odds seemed not to be in his favor. While at Hampton, Washington distinguished himself as a student and accepted a teaching position in his hometown after graduating in 1876. He was invited to return to Hampton in 1879 to supervise the American Indian students who had been admitted there as a further experiment with the education of marginalized groups like newly freed blacks and Native Americans. Owing to his success at Hampton, which originally enrolled black and Indian students, Washington was recommended by Hampton's founder and president to establish a school in Alabama to serve the African American students of that part of the country. In 1881, Tuskegee Institute, patterned after the Hampton model, opened its doors. Washington's work at Tuskegee would propel him into the national spotlight less than two decades later. The founding of Tuskegee helped to

ensure Washington's fame and the story that he would go on to write well before his fortieth birthday.

Washington's most significant published work is his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901). Partly a slave narrative and partly a collection of speeches he had made in the years after his founding of Tuskegee, *Up From Slavery* is characterized by a sense of humility and an unshakable faith in the ultimate rightness of things. The well-chosen title, with the emphasis on the word "Up," underscores Washington's firm belief in the upward mobility of African Americans if they would only take advantage of the opportunities presented to them and work hard to achieve a place of substance in the world. *Up From Slavery* opens with an account of the barrenness and desolation of the slave experience. As with many slave narratives or life stories, there is the usual emphasis on what slaves did *not* know and what they did *not* have. What is unusual about Washington's account, however bleak the experience, is the absence of any hard feelings about the institution of slavery or against any of those who presided over its place in the American fabric. This lack of anger and bitterness contrasts with narratives written earlier, such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* that spoke often and directly against the "infernal" character of slavery. James Robinson notes in his Introduction to the 2003 edition that, "throughout the entire book, [Washington] is conciliatory and forgiving toward southern whites and their system of racism and oppression."³⁰ Even in the chapter that deals with the period of Reconstruction, Washington was far more willing to be critical of the ignorance and lack of sophistication of African Americans where office holding and education were concerned than of opportunism and chicanery of whites in their dealings with African Americans in these and other ventures during the early days of their new citizenship. This kind of criticism of the black race continued throughout *Up from Slavery*; Washington at times seemed to hold African Americans responsible for their own wretched condition in the aftermath of freedom. Recent studies by Houston Baker and others have sought to reinterpret Washington's strategic use of accommodationist strategies, especially within the context of African American modernism.³¹

The founding of Tuskegee Institute and the fervor with which Washington undertook the building of the school are among the most compelling and heart-warming sections of the autobiography, even if one is not persuaded by Washington's insistence on normal school and vocational training for African Americans at the expense and near exclusion of intellectual training. This position would generate considerable monetary support from white philanthropists and equal amounts of consternation from African Americans who felt that Washington was selling the black race short.

Clearly the most provocative chapter in *Up From Slavery* contains the text of “The Atlanta Exposition Address” that Washington delivered at the Cotton States Exposition on September 18, 1895. Washington was chosen to represent African Americans at this Southern version of the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago two years earlier. The Atlanta Exposition was designed to show the progress toward the rebuilding of the South in the thirty years since the end of the Civil War, and Booker T. Washington was selected by the planners of the exposition to represent African American progress. Nowhere is Washington’s dual stance – conciliation and accommodation – clearer and more direct than in the scant few pages of this address. Rayford W. Logan notes that the speech was “one of the most effective pieces of political oratory in the history of the United States.”³² Throughout the speech, Washington focused on the image and theme of the loyal and devoted Negro.³³ Yet he also pointed out that clearly a third of Southerners were African Americans who could not be ignored if the South expected to live up to the promise of its reconstructed self. Fully aware that he was addressing an audience that was often hostile, Washington sought to allay the fears of Southern whites who were by 1895 fully engaged in redeeming the South from the hands of black interlopers and white opportunists.

Washington’s speech was immediately hailed by whites North and South. He was touted in the white press and congratulated by many prominent whites, including Governor Bullock of Georgia and President Grover Cleveland. As a result of his new notoriety, Washington all but sealed his designation as national spokesman for the black race, an unofficial post left vacant by the death of Frederick Douglass earlier that same year. This new national prominence also propelled Tuskegee Institute into the spotlight, where it became a “machine,” as it were, that determined in large part the direction that the education of African Americans would take well into the twentieth century.

As much as “The Atlanta Exposition Address” and Washington’s new-found prominence were celebrated by most whites, the speech earned the consternation of many blacks and some whites. Drawing from the words, his critics viewed him a sellout and dubbed the speech “The Atlanta Compromise.” Rather than aiding African American progress, they argued, the speech, fueled by the growing conservatism of Booker T. Washington, actually set back their progress and minimized black efforts to become full and equal partners with whites in a land built on the Jeffersonian premise that “all men are created equal.” While there were many critics and detractors, W. E. B. Du Bois’s almost clinical dissection of Washington’s positions and his

Tuskegee machine served to create a debate on the direction for African Americans that extended well into the twentieth century.

However, even criticism from such an able opponent as Du Bois could not diminish the growth in Washington's national stature and influence. By the early years of the twentieth century, in addition to publishing the well-received autobiography, Washington had founded the National Negro Business League and dined at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt. Further, until his death in 1915, Washington exercised considerable influence in national black affairs, while Tuskegee remained secure in its position as a preeminent black educational institution in the South.

Although Washington and Du Bois both were interested in the advancement of African Americans, in terms of demeanor and philosophy the two were quite far apart. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, fully a decade later than Washington and one who had not known slavery at first hand. He attended integrated schools in Great Barrington and entered Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, graduating in 1888 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. He then entered Harvard and studied both there and at the University of Berlin over the next seven years. In 1895, Du Bois became the first African American to earn the Ph.D. from Harvard, the same year that Washington delivered the speech at the Atlanta Exposition.

For a brief period while a student at Fisk, Du Bois taught at a rural black school in Tennessee, his first experience with educating African Americans. This confirmed for him the worthy endeavor of intellectual training for those students who came of age in the generations after slavery. Du Bois later taught at both Wilberforce and Atlanta Universities and was clearly committed to the educational advancement of African Americans. While he recognized the place that normal and vocational training played in promoting black economic achievement, Du Bois flatly rejected the notion that higher education for African Americans and the exercise of their rights as American citizens should in any way take a back seat. This position evolved into what Du Bois promoted as the idea of the Talented Tenth, that the progress of African Americans rightly rested with those who were trained for leadership.

In 1903, at age thirty-five, Du Bois published what became a work for the age, the seminal text in African American Studies, *The Souls of Black Folk*. The volume brought together essays that had been published before and signaled the arrival of an unusual intellectual force, a black man who had the requisite training and the skill with which to analyze the black condition from an inside perspective, and the courage to do so without apology. *The Souls of Black Folk*

runs the gamut from general history and treatise on African Americans, through a cultural analysis of the Negro spirituals, and a biography of a foremost minister and missionary Alexander Crummell, to an early fictional work that introduces themes that Du Bois would explore in novels he would subsequently write. All of the essays that comprise *Souls* are characterized by a scholarly insight and highly allusive language that illustrate Du Bois's extensive training and his powers of close analysis. Furthermore, Du Bois's tone is one of manly confidence that contrasts directly with Washington's folksy humility.

Perhaps the most provocative essay in *The Souls of Black Folk* is titled "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," a particularly painstaking and analytic dismissal of Washington's policies, an earlier version of which had appeared in the *Dial* for July 16, 1901 under the title of "The Evolution of Negro Leadership." In this essay, Du Bois confronts directly the accommodationist stance of Booker T. Washington. Du Bois had come to oppose Washington's philosophy in the years following 1895 when Washington delivered what Du Bois preferred to call "The Atlanta Compromise." Although Du Bois offered a terse note of congratulation when the speech was delivered, calling the speech "a word fitly spoken,"³⁴ over the next several years he became increasingly troubled by what he considered as Washington's capitulation to the white power structure in matters of social equality and proper education for black men. In an almost gracious introduction, Du Bois notes the remarkable rise of Booker T. Washington to a position of national prominence: "Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington." In the pages following this observation, Du Bois, with the precision of a clinician, assails what he calls Washington's "programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence to civil and political rights." Noting that Washington's program is "not wholly original,"³⁵ Du Bois argues that "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission."³⁶ Du Bois then positions himself against this tired and worn modus operandi and argues that since "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,"³⁷ it therefore requires new leadership, manly leadership, leadership that does not back down in the face of challenge.

In "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois provides a capsulized history of the protest tradition in African American life and history in which he foregrounds "the assertion of the manhood rights of the Negro by himself,"³⁸ and suggests that Washington has failed to honor and keep this

tradition by allowing himself to be placed in the position of a compromiser. Thus, in Du Bois's estimation, Washington is an ineffective leader to meet the challenges that African Americans face in the twentieth century. Du Bois not only dismisses Washington as unsuitable for leadership of African Americans on the large scale, but also takes issue with Washington's insistence on normal school education and vocational training as adequate for the aspirations and potential accomplishments of African Americans. Here Du Bois asserts his idea of the Talented Tenth and the crucial role they play in advancing the race. Even more, Du Bois's advocacy of the important role of a university-trained cadre of teachers to the achievement of Washington's own goals at Tuskegee underscores the shortsightedness of Washington's program and points out a fallacy in his philosophy, what he calls a "triple paradox" in Washington's position.³⁹ In concluding his assessment of the debilitating effect of the "Atlanta Compromise" on black progress, Du Bois asserts that, to the degree that Washington was right on certain issues and right-headed in addressing them, then African Americans were obligated to stand with him; but in those matters where Washington's assertiveness was found wanting, then black people must oppose him.

In subsequent years, the Washington/Du Bois Debate escalated and affected to a degree almost every aspect of African American life. Du Bois, like Washington, rose to national prominence, first as the organizer of the Niagara Movement in 1905 and then as a founder of the NAACP in 1909. He wielded considerable influence, beginning in 1910, as editor-in-chief of *The Crisis* magazine, the official publication of the NAACP, and, later, as a mover and shaker in what became known as the New Negro Movement. The debate with Washington did not subside, as subsequent members of the Talented Tenth, notably the novelists Nella Larsen and Ralph Ellison, took on Washington and the Tuskegee Machine in their fictional works, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Invisible Man* (1952) respectively.

In terms of writers who were more concerned with art than politics, the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of the first African American fiction writer to garner significant national attention. In a relatively short period, from 1899 to 1905, Charles Chesnutt published two collections of short stories and three novels; he holds the distinction, according to Rayford W. Logan, of being "the first colored writer exposing the sordid side of plantation life to have a book published by a prominent firm."⁴⁰ Chesnutt, born in 1858 in Cleveland, Ohio, was already a member of the Ohio bar and the successful owner of a legal stenographers firm before he published his first story. Returning to his family's ancestral home in the sandhills region of North

Carolina after the Emancipation, Chesnutt grew up in the Reconstruction South and drew on the rich history of the area and on the examples of life during Reconstruction and its aftermath to inform his stories and novels. Like Dunbar, his literary contemporary, Chesnutt's "conjure tales" might be viewed as advancing the Plantation School of writing, but a closer inspection reveals that he exploits that form of writing for his own purposes, i.e., to show that black stereotypes are often misleading.

Chesnutt published his first short story, "The Goophered Grapevine," in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1887. The first of several "conjure stories," "The Goophered Grapevine" celebrates African American storytelling and its teller in the person of Uncle Julius McAdoo, an elderly former slave who embellishes a tale of the old plantation and the workings of Aun' Peggy, the plantation conjure woman. While Uncle Julius's story appears to be the harmless ramblings of an old man, he clearly masks his real purpose of securing a place and livelihood from the potential purchaser of an antebellum vineyard. Rich in dialect, the conjure stories seem to promote the usual negative stereotype of the happy ducky, a stock character in the Plantation School, but Chesnutt infuses the characters with a complexity that implodes the negativity usually associated with these character types. Following the success of this story, Chesnutt gathered a number of similar stories into a collection titled *The Conjure Woman* published in March 1899 by Houghton Mifflin, a major publishing company located in Boston.

Chesnutt is also known for his "stories of the color line," stories that thematically and situationally examine inter- and intraracial interactions between whites and blacks in the post-Emancipation South. Principal among this group of stories is "The Wife of His Youth," the title story of his second book of short stories that were collected and published also in 1899. While the "conjure stories" showed Chesnutt's facility with interpreting and delivering in written form the culture and activities of pre-Emancipation African Americans, the "color line stories" demonstrated his craft as a writer of original material – black and white characters in the situations and milieu of Reconstruction. In "The Wife of His Youth," for example, Chesnutt draws on a long-standing division along color lines *within* the black race. Chesnutt, who was light enough to pass for white, underscores the loyalty of African Americans to each other despite color and dismisses the notion that light-skinned African Americans would ignore the darker brother for the sake of safety and expediency. In another such story, "The Bouquet," Chesnutt offers the idea that a dog is freer than an African American in the segregated South when a young black child is barred from placing a floral offering on the grave

of her recently deceased white teacher who is buried in a "Whites Only" cemetery. The child then has the teacher's dog, which can move freely in and out of the cemetery, deliver the bouquet to the gravesite. Yet another color line story, "The Sheriff's Children," foregrounds a white sheriff who has to arrest and protect his black son from a lynch mob. In these and other stories, Chesnutt deals with intraracial color prejudice, both real and presumed, with Jim Crow laws and how they work to undermine human dignity, and with the far-reaching effects of miscegenation, color caste, and passing.

Also in 1899, *The House behind the Cedars* appeared, the first of Chesnutt's three novels to be published during the period. The novel is a full-scale treatment of the phenomenon of passing and one that exploits the well-recognized theme of the tragic mulatta. Rena Walden, a young, beautiful, mixed-race woman, leaves her mother's house to try her fortune in the white world. She falls in love and becomes engaged to a wealthy white Southern gentleman, George Tryon, but before they can be married her race is discovered and a socially, emotionally, and physically devastated Rena must return to her mother's house behind the cedars. Chesnutt dealt with the issue of passing in several of his works, and while he recognized it as a possibility he saw clearly its futility for solving the race problem. As the light-skinned, very accomplished Mr. Ryder, the Dean of the Blue Veins, resolved in "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt advocated the well-known admonition "To thine own self be true."

The Marrow of Tradition (1901) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) were both controversial novels. *The Marrow of Tradition* was based on the Wilmington, North Carolina Race Riot that occurred in 1898 and it is an accurate, though fictionalized depiction of how the white power structure undermined the gains made by African Americans in that city during Reconstruction. Moreover, the narrative shows how whites conspired to destroy the black community and drive blacks from the city, many of whom never returned. Included in the novel are Chesnutt's usual theme of political expediency and miscegenation as roadblocks to black progress. While many critics assailed Chesnutt's account, history has vindicated him as the accuracy of his account was verified during various reexaminations of the facts of the Wilmington Massacre during its centennial in 1998.

The Colonel's Dream was controversial for a different reason. In it, Chesnutt depicts a former Confederate officer who lives in the North for some years following the end of the Civil War, before returning to the South with progressive ideas about race and rebuilding the South, ideas that proved to be out of step with fellow whites. The Colonel proposed to build a mill and

provide equal employment opportunity and equal pay for all workers, black and white. In addition, he hoped to make amends for past wrongs demonstrated toward African Americans and move the South into a new era of peace and prosperity. However, because whites feared that economic parity would somehow lead to a fuller presumption of equal rights, they destroyed the mill and, in the process, his dream. Not only did the critics attack Chesnutt's depiction of the white South, they further dismissed his novel because of his handling of the Colonel, suggesting that African Americans could not write realistically about white characters, a complaint made about Chesnutt's contemporary, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and about later writers like Zora Neale Hurston who foregrounded white characters in her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948).

As the twentieth century moved toward the end of its first decade, it appeared to some that African Americans had perhaps begun to weather the storm brought by the post-Reconstruction violence and mayhem. While the Jim Crow laws were fully entrenched in the South after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, African Americans adapted to segregation in the South and challenged it when their success seemed likely. Lynchings continued, even despite the efforts of active and vociferous protests. After 1901, African Americans had no black representation in Congress until the second decade of the century. Black churches, schools, businesses, and other institutions seemed to turn inward in an effort to build, improve, and protect their own communities. Already, however, there were the beginnings of the "northward and cityward" movement of black Southerners captured in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925). This movement would escalate into the Great Migration in the second decade of the new century.

Despite the absence of political strength, W. E. B. Du Bois called for a gathering of black leaders and white supporters that formed the Niagara Movement in 1905, that grew into the NAACP in 1909. The organization chose to fight for civil rights through agitation and challenge in the courts of violations that deprived African Americans of rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. The publication of *The Crisis* magazine, which began in 1910, gave Du Bois and the NAACP an outlet through which to channel their constant protest against the wide-ranging wrongs perpetrated against African Americans.

While the essay continued to be a powerful weapon of social criticism, stories, novels, and poems began to appear with increasing frequency as new writers joined already established writers like Dunbar and Chesnutt, both of whom ceased publishing in the middle of the first decade, one stilled by death,

the other by reactionary critics. For example, the early poems of James Weldon Johnson signaled a latent literary talent that would mature as the Harlem Renaissance progressed into the 1920s, and the several novels of Sutton Griggs kept that art form alive, as did such obscure novelists as F. W. Grant, Oscar Micheaux, and Otis Shuckelford.⁴¹ Strands of the novels would reemerge in the 1920s and 1930s. Also significant was the appearance of Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1910), which laid the groundwork for literary history and criticism of a body of work that has been largely ignored by the scholarly community. All of these genres would flourish in the hands and imaginations of a new generation of African American writers and critics who would sustain the movement we know as the Harlem Renaissance.

Notes

1. Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* [1899] (Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969), p. 48.
2. See James D. Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Juan Williams and Dwayne Ashley's *I'll Find a Way or Make One: A Tribute to Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (New York: Amistad, 2004).
3. Richard A. Long and Eugenia Collier (eds.), *Afro-American Writing*, 2nd edn (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), p. 118.
4. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro* [1953] (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 320.
5. Claudia Tate, "Pauline Hopkins," in William Andrews, Frances Foster, and Trudier Harris (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 366–367.
6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), p. 40.
7. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, p. 13.
8. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 40.
9. Philip S. Foner (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of Frederick Douglass* [1945] (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*, 8n.
11. Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 61.
12. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*, p. 262.
13. Albery A. Whitman, "Twasinta's Seminoles; or Rape of Florida," in William H. Robinson (ed.), *Early Black American Poets* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1969), pp. 212–214; p. 214.
14. Long and Collier, *Afro-American Writing*, p. 123.
15. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 8th edn (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 318.

16. Alexander Crummell, "The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs," in James Daley (ed.), *Great Speeches by African Americans* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), pp. 73–80; p. 73.
17. Alexander Crummell, "The Attitude of the American Mind toward the Negro Intellect," in Long and Collier, *Afro-American Writing*, pp. 125–128.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 128.
19. Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 318.
20. Quoted in Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, p. 258.
21. Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 82.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
23. Quoted in Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), p. 1.
24. Paula Giddings, *Ida, A Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008), pp. 220–221.
25. *Ibid.*
26. John Edgar Wideman, *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Classics of Early African American Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 2001), p. 793.
27. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel*, p. 60.
28. Anna Julia Cooper, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," in Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi (eds.), *African American Literature* (New York: Pearson, 1988), pp. 1152–1170; p. 1157.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 1161–1162.
30. James Robinson, "Introduction," in Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* [1901] (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), p. ix.
31. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
32. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, p. 276.
33. Robinson, *Early Black American Poets*, p. ix.
34. Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. 1 [1973] (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 39.
35. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 35.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–41.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
40. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, p. 331.
41. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel*, p. 91.

The “fictions” of race

KEITH BYERMAN AND HANNA WALLINGER

In order to understand the literary production of the period between the American Civil War and the First World War, readers need to be aware of the complex set of narratives that shaped the era. By “narratives,” we mean the stories created to explain national and regional history, institutions, beliefs, and social practices. It is through such stories that national, regional, racial, and gender identities are constructed and justified. Thus, the white South, after the Civil War, reinvented its rebellion and defeat as a tragedy in which a noble cause was overwhelmed by the region’s own pride and by massive Northern aggression. This narrative was embodied in “plantation school” fiction by Thomas Nelson Page and others.¹ The Union narrative was divided into separate plots; this division enabled the triumph of white supremacy later in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the North saw itself as attempting to maintain the nation that had been established by the Founding Fathers in the face of Southern assault on that vision. The alternative story represented the war as expansion of the national principles of liberty and justice through the abolition of slavery. In this version, the helpless and needy black population was saved through the courageous actions of Northern white soldiers and politicians against the greedy and lecherous plantation owners. The immediate aftermath of the war was an effort to bring together the Southern story with the first Northern one, as Andrew Johnson largely agreed to allow the South to reenter the Union without fundamental change beyond the constitutional end of slavery. The approach came into conflict with the liberationist perspective, which succeeded in producing Reconstruction, which punished the white South for both its treason and its slaveholding, and made some effort to bring African Americans into participation in the nation through constitutional amendment, military occupation, and political, economic, and educational reform.² But this narrative line had limited appeal, as its enactment required huge and long-term investments in resources and ideology. What emerged after a short period was the story that Leigh Anne

Duck has called “the nation’s region.”³ In this construction, the South was seen as a distinct part of the country, with its own history, customs, and values. Because of this difference, it was felt that the region was best able to determine its own fate, especially in matters of race. Thus the Northern desire for union was met with Southern allegiance, while the white South was free to pursue an agenda of white supremacy, as long as it gave lip service to principles of democracy.

Within the framework of this emergent national narrative was a nexus of racial and gender narratives. The most straightforward of these is the white Northern story. It was largely willing to accept whatever the South said about matters of race. It added its own intellectual justification for this through the ideas of Social Darwinism. This ideology contended that the biological notion of natural selection applied as well to human society. Certain classes and races were better equipped in the struggle for survival and deserved the benefits of modern civilization. The others were in a position of permanent inferiority and should eventually die out.⁴ Added to this position were the pseudoscientific arguments of the time, which claimed objective biological evidence for racial differences.⁵

According to white supremacist contentions, the South was a white civilization intruded upon by a less than fully human (the degree of “less human” varied) alien population. This group needed to be carefully controlled because, while it could produce good workers and loyal servants, its lack of civilizing qualities made it prone to violence, laziness, and sexual promiscuity. The Reconstruction era was proof of the need for strong regulation of blacks; in conjunction with Northern intruders and Southern traitors, they had nearly ruined the South during one short decade. Crucial to this plot was the belief in purity and dread of contamination; any interaction between the races must assume white superiority. Otherwise, the purity of “white blood” was at risk. This belief justified white terrorism, including the commonplace practice of lynching,⁶ taking its most visible and notorious form with the founding of the Ku Klux Klan almost immediately after the end of the Civil War.

Within this construction, distinctions were made between black women and men; in each case two different figures were needed. Among women, the *Mammy* was the nurturing character who both cared for the white family and served to demonstrate white concern for their black subordinates. She had no life outside of the white household and desired none. In contrast was the *Jezebel*, the black temptress. It was necessary to explain the significant presence of a mixed-race population in the South, both before and after the Civil War. Since the rape of black women was inconsistent with notions of superiority

and purity, an alternative explanation was developed. It was precisely because of the animal-like sensuality of such women that white men were unable to resist them. The parallel figures were *Uncle Tom* and the black beast. The submissive black man was always referred to either by his first name or simply as “boy.” He was portrayed in literature and in the media as an unreliable but still loyal servant who, regardless of his age, never emerged from childhood. His manhood was not in question because it was assumed to have never existed. In contrast was the assertive black man who was a threat that had to be endlessly watched. He sought above all a relationship with the white woman. Sterling Brown in 1933 went beyond these social creations to list seven stereotypes found in white American literature: the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive.⁷ In combination, these groupings suggest the deep need to generate fictive projections of the black reality after the Civil War.

African American cultural narratives responded to these constructions of racial and national identities. However, it is important to understand that the African American stories were not merely negative reactions to white definitions of blackness, but were efforts to create a positive racial image within the framework of American society. With some crucial differences, these stories generally portrayed blacks as Americans who should have opportunities like those of other citizens. A key variation was offered by Martin Delany (1812–85) and Henry McNeal Turner (1833–1915), who felt that the United States was unlikely to ever accept racial equality and that the future of the race would be brighter in Africa.⁸ During and after the Civil War, Frederick Douglass offered through his later autobiography and other writings a vision of an American identity in which both race and gender were irrelevant in the pursuit of justice and liberty. His strong defenses of the rights of both African Americans and women contended that the basic humanity of both groups gave them fundamental equality within the society and the status of American citizens no different in rights from anyone else.

When Douglass died in 1895, Booker T. Washington claimed the mantle of black leadership by deemphasizing political and social rights in favor of a story of self-help and moral uplift, a story very much in line with the Horatio Alger myth of the time, but not especially useful in the context of the emergence of corporate capitalism. These social narratives contended that those at the bottom of society, regardless of race or class, could rise in the world by practicing thrift, hard work, and moral rectitude. Any prejudice against these striving individuals would be overcome through recognition of their

potential to contribute to the greater good of the society. In contrast, W. E. B. Du Bois returned to the Douglass model of full rights, but added, in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, a tragic element with his notion of double-consciousness, the splitting of black identity into racial and national components: "One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁹ Being African American was thus inherently heroic, as each black person made his or her way in a world dominated by those who refused to accept them as fellow humans and fellow citizens. In this context, Anna Julia Cooper created a similar narrative for women of color, contending that their double disadvantage, of race and gender, could be overcome through education and opportunity.

Just as black intellectuals were producing images of a race integrated into the larger American society, the general population was acting out its own sense of a place in the larger society. Black schools, businesses, and churches were established. A black middle class began to emerge as individuals and sometimes whole communities moved to more urban areas, mostly within the South, but increasingly to the North.¹⁰ This shift, from an economics and culture of slavery to one of independence and class differences, contributed to social and literary debates about the relationship of African Americans to the larger society. In an era replete with the violence and repression focused on this newly free population, black writers drew attention to a variety of issues as they sought to define a place for themselves and the race in the reconstructed nation.

Although literary historians have paid more attention to the fiction by male writers such as Chesnut, Dunbar, Griggs, and Du Bois, today they acknowledge the contribution of women fiction writers in the canon of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction fiction. In *Conflicting Stories*, Elizabeth Ammons defines the need for a "new historical context"¹¹ for a gendered study of the turn-of-the-century period of American (white and non-white) women writers in order to contribute to the "unfolding, complex, but nonetheless connected story now being recovered of American women writers as a whole."¹² Claudia Tate singles out the aspect of domesticity as a defining force of African American women writers of that period as a means to explore the contested spaces of race, gender, and class.¹³ A gendered discussion of these writers, as the following two chapters will show, emphasizes the prevailing gendered mood of the time when Anna Julia Cooper postulated once and for all that only she could say when and where she entered,¹⁴ and when issues of

masculinity and manhood on the one side and an emphasis on the role of womanhood defined their writings about the formation of the American family, the evaluation of the slave past, miscegenation, the moral and political values of the nation, and a utopian hope for a better future. Although male and female writers did not employ different modes and styles of writing, to single out the women as a generation and challenge the concept of a largely male-dominated canon gives allowance to the “story of female self-development”¹⁵ without diminishing the importance of the many and varied male voices.

African American male writers, 1865–1910

KEITH BYERMAN

The best-known writers of the period sometimes referred to as the black nadir have been a handful of men: Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sutton Griggs, and W. E. B. Du Bois. The work of literary historians, editors, and critics has revealed to us a much richer era that includes a significant number of women and other men. The larger male group produced fiction in several genres, including historical, speculative, romance, local color, *Bildungsroman*, domestic, and social problem narratives. Not surprisingly, we also see blendings of these categories, as, for example in Du Bois's *Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), which joins the romance to female coming of age to economic and political analysis to socialist utopia. Key themes include black manhood and womanhood, education, war, cross-racial relationships, family, black achievement, racial violence and exploitation, and the sources and nature of moral order. There is also an effort to validate the truth of the narratives through embedded elements such as speeches, public documents, footnotes, homilies, and excerpts from racist publications.

A brief mention should be made of racial-problem novels, the ones most commonly associated with this era. The two most prominent are Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). The first of these is a thinly disguised analysis of the Wilmington, North Carolina riot of 1898. The author clearly places the blame for violence on powerful whites who fear the emergence of black economic and political power. Through the local newspaper and other venues, they spread rumors and inflame white fears. Once the hostilities begin in the novel, Chesnutt's interest turns to black responses to the situation. Some act in armed self-defense, while others seek to escape or simply protect their families in non-violent ways. *The Colonel's Dream* examines an effort at economic reform led by a liberal white Southerner who fails to understand the deeply embedded structures of exploitation linked to racial arrangements. Again Chesnutt offers a critical view of the white South and finds little to remedy the situation. Despite (or perhaps because of) the accuracy of his depictions, the novels were not commercially successful, and the author effectively ended his literary career after their publication. A little-known work of the period, *Hanover; or Persecution of the Lowly* (1900) written by David Bryant Fulton under the pseudonym Jack Thorne, also takes up the

Wilmington riot with one of the same goals as Chesnutt: to correct the historical record that blamed blacks for the violence.

Most of the other authors of the time were not so directly concerned with representing current events. A dominant concern for these writers was the family before and after Emancipation. The argument for a strong black family was a theme that many male writers shared with women writers of the time, as it was a means of claiming a commitment on the part of those emerging from slavery to the social order of American society. Some novels, including James H. W. Howard's *Bond and Free; or the True Tale of Slave Times* (1886) and G. Langhorne Pryor's *Neither Bond nor Free (A Plea)* (1902), took the creation and maintaining of families as often a higher priority than social and political issues. On occasion, such as in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, the character of the black family is crucial even when the focus is on other issues, such as racial violence. While it is the case that, as Guilia Fabi has noted, a main function of fiction of this period was to challenge white stereotypes of the race,¹⁶ it is also true that some male writers saw the family as threatened and even threatening as the result of historical and social pressures.

One very positive version of the family narrative is *Historical Romance of the American Negro* (1902) by Charles H. Fowler, a saga of one black family's experience before, during, and after the Civil War. Beulah Jackson, the narrator, is born in 1838 near Louisville, Kentucky, to a black mother and a white father. The concern of the text is neither with her personal experience of slavery nor with her early relationships. Instead, it views the South from the outside. By the end of the first chapter, Beulah has escaped with her lover, Tom, whom she marries once they reach Cincinnati. After they move to Buffalo, they manage to free Beulah's mother, who has been sold down the river to New Orleans by her master's jealous wife.

The narrative then describes abolitionist activities, military service in the war, and Reconstruction from a black Northern perspective. Several chapters are devoted to Tom's correspondence about battles he participates in and observes. The emphasis is on the bravery of black troops and his desire to be reunited with his family. In a careful balancing act, the text comments on the racism of the Union Army and the courage of Confederate soldiers, while simultaneously defending the role of black soldiers. With the end of the war, the family is brought back together, and the story turns from them to focus on the problems of Reconstruction, exodusters (black emigrants to the West), and on the efforts of prominent black figures to address racial issues. The story's timeline goes up to the Spanish-American War and includes a depiction of the bravery of black soldiers yet again. This repeated military narration

makes a claim for black manhood that rejects both the positive and negative stereotypes by representing it as clearly linked to American masculinity in both its courage and sense of responsibility for family.

The text incorporates images and documents relevant to the events presented to provide an impression of historical reality. Such materials show battle scenes and famous figures, but also validate the travels of the characters by offering, for example, a tourist photo of the Tower of London. This archive suggests that the concept of “romance” in the title is merely a device to encourage readership at a time when the audiences for popular fiction were drawn to plantation fiction and other forms of historical romance. The underlying purpose was to show the positive realities of black life, including the roles of African Americans in the social, political, and military life of the nation. At the same time, it was important to demonstrate the strength and ambition of the black family, so as to undermine the racial stereotypes that dominated popular culture.

Bond and Free: A True Tale of Slave Times by James H. W. Howard takes the form of a slave narrative to demonstrate the resilience and loyalty of the black family. It combines a variety of escape adventures with a commentary on life under slavery, serving in part as a response to the plantation romances written in the 1880s by Thomas Nelson Page and others. Howard claims in the preface that the events are true, that they are based on the experiences of people he knew. He also asserts that he has no desire to cause animosity, but seeks only to record some of the “milder forms of treatment” to which slaves were subjected.¹⁷ Since these include miscegenation, forced separations of families, and beatings to death, it is apparent that the preface can be considered an act of signifying on the plantation tradition.

What is narrated, in place of the benevolent masters and contented slaves of that tradition, is a story of white corruption, indifference, and cruelty on one side and black courage, sacrifice, and freedom-loving on the other. It tells the tale of light-skinned Purcey, obviously the daughter of the owner of the Maxwell plantation, and her marriage to William, who is purchased by Maxwell for this purpose. Later, William is lost in a card game and eventually sold to a slave trader. Meanwhile, Purcey is separated from her mother in order to accompany the mistress on an excursion for the white woman’s health. In another ironic twist, the effect of this journey is to make Purcey very ill. Her mother, understanding the threat to her daughter’s long-term well-being, plots an escape to Canada; Elva believes the plan will succeed because no one she has ever helped has been recaptured. Once the plan is well under way, Elva proudly confesses the scheme, for which she is whipped to death.

William soon after escapes from the slave coffle with the aid of a conjure woman and eventually is reunited with Purcey in Canada. While the narrative sometimes descends into caricatures of field slaves and black speech, it does argue that the flaws found in those enslaved were primarily the result of the peculiar institution and not inherent characteristics of the race. In fact, it argues that the black family is clearly superior to white families in sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and human sympathy.

Nellie Brown, or The Jealous Wife (1871) by Thomas Detter (c.1826–?) shows a more negative side of the black family. In the novel, the social assertiveness of women leads to a family’s destruction. Mrs. H., herself divorced several times, determines that Nellie Brown would be better off married to someone else and sets about making her unhappy in her current relationship by arousing jealousy over a widowed neighbor. Nellie is easily persuaded and even accepts support from her suitor while still officially married. Mr. Brown is charged with adultery, and during the trial Mrs. H and her co-conspirators testify against him. His lawyer, however, discovers the truth and exposes the plot. In the end, the Browns are reunited after Nellie humbles herself before her husband and the widow. The plotters are exiled from the community. Detter clearly sees the family as the key to morality, and threats to it are simultaneously threats to the moral and social order. Moreover, it is women who are the moral center of the family, and anything that corrupts them, including a desire for greater freedom or advancement, constitutes an attack on society.

The sharpest contrast to the positive representation of the family comes in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). Written in a naturalistic style, the novel records the decline and eventual dissolution rather than the accomplishments of the black family. While inverting plantation school sentimentality by showing the dishonor of a proud white Southern family, the story also challenges the assumptions of black success through the adoption of middle-class standards and migration to the North. In fact, Dunbar contends, a black middle class arouses both the suspicions of whites, who take for granted black incompetence, and the resentment of many blacks, whose status and education have not significantly changed.

The example is Berry Hamilton, the loyal and resourceful butler for the white family, falsely accused of theft, who shows us the negative consequences of hard work and thrift if one is black. Serving a lengthy prison sentence for the false theft, Berry watches his family, lacking community support, move North to New York City. There the mother attempts to maintain family standards, but finds that her children are strongly attracted to what was then

known as “the sporting life.” Dunbar represents the urban environment as corrupt, manipulative, and violent; it is in many ways morally worse than the South, since it involves blacks taking advantage of other blacks. In the end, the son goes mad and murders his lover, the daughter becomes a semi-successful chorus girl, and the mother marries an abuser.

When Berry is set free after a New York reporter uncovers the truth, the reunited and remarried couple return to the plantation after the abuser is killed. Because the white owner has gone insane and his family has been disgraced by the scandal, the Hamiltons are able to take up their former lives. As Dickson Bruce has argued, the novel is the most fatalistic of Dunbar’s works, reflecting his sense of the inescapability of American racism.¹⁸ None of the options apparent in other works of the period – morality, political accommodation, economic development, education, migration – provides opportunities for even the best of the characters. White racial antagonism and black dehumanization prove too strong a combination. What is apparent here, more than in any other text of the period, is an argument for the fragility of black achievement in the context of a racialized society.

Related to the interest in family is the presentation of romance. As Hazel Carby and others have pointed out, a special concern of the era was the image of the black woman, and among women writers it was important to counter notions of her as promiscuous that remained from slavery. Male writers tend to follow this pattern, more through the use of Victorian characters than through overt dramatization of threats to the black woman’s virtue. In addition, romance is often presented in the context of political or social commentary or as a challenge to literary genres (the tragic mulatta or plantation narrative) that themselves have racial implications. Sutton Griggs, for example, consistently portrays heroines who are beautiful, intelligent, and devoted to some high moral purpose. Erma Wysong of *Overshadowed* (1901) is ostracized because she is willing to do menial labor in order to support herself, and she also rejects the attentions of a wealthy young white man. Later she begs her brother to confess to a murder in order to clear his conscience. She finds a worthy black man, also committed to the advancement of the race. Discussions of racial violence, the justice system, and political maneuvering are enabled by the love plot. Similarly, in *The Hindered Hand* (1905) a mysterious woman finds herself attracted to a young minister. Their relationship develops in the midst of debates over the proper response of blacks to the repressive conditions of white supremacy; some argue for direct action, while others insist on a more moderate approach. They also discuss the question of racial purity and of ways to end lynching. They must go through a series of

crises, including the lynching of friends, before they can be united and devote themselves to aiding the people of Africa.

G. Langhorne Pryor (1857-?), in *Neither Bond nor Free* (1902), writes of a romance that fails because of differing moral and political values between the lovers. At first, they would seem to be a good match, since Toussaint Ripley is a schoolteacher working with black children, and Merna, who has returned to the South after growing up in Boston, considers teaching to be one of the highest moral callings for members of the race. The problem for them is that Ripley sees politics as the great opportunity in the New South, a position she rejects. Pryor, through the text, suggests the need for a compromise position that advocates Booker T. Washington's views on industrial training for blacks and on limited participation in the political system while also decrying lynching as an affront to civilization. Merna ends up married to a different character, Strother, who is able to prevent racial violence because both blacks and whites respect him for his hard work and inventiveness. A subplot involves a melodrama in which an educated character "ruins" a local minister's daughter, is imprisoned, and later dies of an unspecified illness. Pryor sees the race as limited in its options given the racist society within which it must live.

In *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), Charles Chesnutt offers what appears to be a classic tragic mulatta story in the tale of Rena Warren. Light enough to pass for white, she is taken by her brother, who is already passing, to South Carolina where his successful law practice has made him a prominent member of the social world. Chesnutt is careful at the beginning of the novel to establish the legal basis for John's behavior; because the rules determine race in large part on social reputation, John can argue that he is not passing at all, but has the legitimate status of a white man. His sister, given her background, beauty, and social graces, can claim the same status. In effect, Chesnutt undermines the very basis for the tragic mulatta tale from the beginning. He then proceeds to place Rena in a situation where she finds herself attracted to and loved by a wealthy young white man. What prevents a happy outcome is her questioning of this new identity and her nostalgia for home, even though her mother would like nothing better than seeing Rena marry into white aristocracy. Through a series of plot contrivances, her secret is discovered by George, the lover, who initially rejects her and then changes his mind. His physical pursuit of her, along with that of a pompous mulatto, leads her into a storm, where she is lost and eventually dies. Thus, the author would seem to bring us to the same end as other works of the genre, with the mixed-race character dying because miscegenation is not permitted within the social structure. But the use of coincidence and other literary tricks to bring

about this conclusion suggests that Chesnutt has other ideas in mind. The novel rejects any essentialist notions of race and therefore any assumption that “blood” must fix the outcome. Instead, he suggests that it is Rena’s false sense of her racial identity that is largely responsible for her fate. Elsewhere, he argues for a “future American” who would be an amalgamation of the various groups that make up American society. This outcome, he insists, would end forever the problems of race in America. In this sense, Rena’s true tragedy is her failure to realize her potential as a new American.

In *The Fanatics* (1901), Dunbar takes up the postbellum version of the plantation narrative. In this variant, the romance is used to symbolize the reuniting of the white North and South, with blacks largely left to fend for themselves. He sets the story in an Ohio town not far from the Kentucky border. A few Southerners and Southern sympathizers are part of the community, but their views are subject to severe criticism as the war begins. The central romance involves Mary Waters and Robert Van Doren as the lovers whose fathers take opposing sides on secession and war. Mary’s father forces the break-up of the engagement, and Robert eventually goes to fight on the Confederate side. The daughter is rejected by her father and eventually moves out of his house; in the meantime, her brother joins the Union Army. A third young man, Walter Stewart, also joins the Northern troops despite the fact that his father is a Southern loyalist.

Dunbar focuses much of his attention on the home front, revealing the narrow-mindedness and fanaticism of those who do not go to war. In the town of Dorbury, the newspaper is threatened with destruction, and the congressman is hanged in effigy for lack of patriotic fervor. At the same time, there is no lack of prejudice against blacks. A local resident, known as Nigger Ed, is treated with scorn and ridicule, until he goes off to the war as Walter Stewart’s servant. When fugitive slaves, now known as contraband, enter the town, they are initially rejected by both white and black residents. It is, ironically, the Southern sympathizer, Stephen Van Doren, who saves them from a white mob.

The author also looks at the Southern front, as Walter Stewart is captured while visiting his parents’ home. Put on parole rather than imprisoned, he develops a relationship with a local woman, for whom he fights a duel. Obedient to his father’s dying wish, he refuses to return to the war. At the same time, Dunbar shows the bravery of blacks when a Southern guerilla force threatens Stewart’s beloved. At the end of the novel, Mary and Robert are reunited and their fathers reconciled. The young man is accepted in the town because he lost his arm while protecting the virtue of a young woman.

Stewart decides to remain in the South; he offers Ed the opportunity to join him on the plantation, but the black man refuses, preferring to garner the attention and income gained by telling stories of his participation in the war and the fates of the husbands and sons who did not return.

On the surface then, Dunbar would appear to complete the plantation narrative with the marriage of North and South. But the text, filled with irony and sarcasm, sees neither side as worthy of respect. While individuals are capable of courage and devotion, neither side separately or in combination is taken seriously. The author's real attitude is most clearly reflected in the experiences of Ed at the end. Walter's invitation comes at the behest of his new wife, who has been delighted at the stories about the black man. When the letter comes, Ed, illiterate, takes it to a local young white man who also served in the Union Army. That man proposes a brief telegram to Stewart, saying simply, “You be damned.”¹⁹ Ed (still referred to as Nigger Ed) rejects this as discourteous. So the man constructs a very pompous reply, which the Southern family finds hilarious. In essence, both sides subject the black man to ridicule and scorn, unless, as the end of the story indicates, he is reinforcing their self-righteousness:

And it was true. There were men who had seen that black man on bloody fields, which were thick with the wounded and dying, and these could not speak of him without tears in their eyes. There were women who begged him to come in and talk to them about their sons who had been left on some Southern field, wives who wanted to hear over again the last words of their loved ones. And so they gave him a place for life and everything he wanted, and from being despised he was much petted and spoiled, for they were all fanatics.²⁰

The closing phrase carefully subverts the sentiment that the previous lines and the generic conventions normally would fulfill. Just as he had earlier challenged assumptions about the black family, so here Dunbar undercuts the romance narrative.

In the realm of speculative fiction, African American male writers made use of some of the conventions of utopian writing made popular by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). In each case, romance was part of the narrative device, though usually not central. The concern of these authors was to propose a way to deal with issues of race by imagining an alternative to contemporary social structures. Edward A. Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904) involves forward time travel, using the device of an airship accident. The narrator, who is apparently white, ends up in Georgia in the year 2006. Here he is cared for by

a young woman who then makes available to him the history of the previous century and informs him of the nature of the new society. Over half of the book is devoted to a chapter that recounts the post-Civil War period and the racial problems that emerged as a result of Northern and Southern political actions. Johnson clearly blames media representations of black life, suppression of black political activity, and racial violence. He incorporates newspaper and magazine articles from such sources as the *New York Evening Post* and *Outlook*, as well as speeches by Southern politicians, to support his position.

What he offers as a solution, as seen in the new society, is an integrated labor force, black children educated in boarding schools so as to receive both academic and practical training, nationalized raw materials, and a government of civil servants rather than politicians. Surprisingly, the races remain separated, with blacks clearly in a position of dependency, though receiving generous assistance from whites such as the heroine does in this novel. In this way Johnson avoids the issue of "social equality," a code term at the time for intermarriage, while constructing a case for black advancement in the society. In essence, he shows the black population to be non-threatening and loyal. The marriage of the narrator and the heroine at the conclusion suggests a positive outcome for a Southern commitment to progressivist reforms in matters of race and social organization.

Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) presents a very different scenario. He imagines a vast black conspiracy designed to gain political control. He presents many of the same problems seen by Johnson, but has little faith in the willingness of whites to make necessary changes. Through the lives of two young black men, he describes the frustrations, difficulties, and consequences of racial oppression. They respond by joining and eventually leading a secret black organization that is structured as a counternational government. Fabi has argued that this utopia marks Griggs as an early advocate of black power.²¹ What is crucial is that the men have different life experiences, in part based on their skin color, and thus come to different conclusions about how to produce social change.

Bernard Belgrave is a mulatto who is the unacknowledged, though legitimate, son of a US Senator. He is provided with resources and assistance that would be unavailable to any other black person. He becomes a successful lawyer who specializes in giving legal aid to blacks. A key crisis for him is the suicide of his beloved, who dies because she believes in black racial purity and thus cannot marry a mulatto. In such a plotline, Griggs inverts the narratives of such racist authors as Thomas Dixon (1864–1946), who insisted on the purity of white womanhood, even to the point of death. As a result of this event, Bernard becomes even more devoted to racial justice, even to the point of racial suicide.

In contrast is the story of Belton Piedmont, a son of field slaves, whose dark skin and class background mean that he is subject to a variety of discriminatory and even violent acts. Crucially for Griggs's argument, the two young men are equally intelligent, so their experiences are clearly a function of American racial and class attitudes. Belton is a "New Negro," one who does not tolerate unfair treatment, but who is punished repeatedly for his assertiveness. Eventually, Bernard has to intervene to save his life. At the same time, Belton has gained a refined sense of who the friends and enemies of the race are. Belton's own romance is disrupted when his wife produces a child who is very light-skinned, leading him to abandon them. Here Griggs reverses another trope of racialized fiction, since it is the child's putative whiteness that is the threat to the family.

Belton and Bernard are brought together in the Imperium, a secret organization with thousands of members, initially created in the early days of the new nation. Bernard quickly rises to a leadership role and, when racial violence increases, makes the case for a violent response. Belton makes the case for a more temperate approach, though Arlene Elder overstates his position when she labels it a version of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance.²² Rather, he contends that violence would lead to racial annihilation and that blacks would be better served by publicizing the Imperium and making demands for immediate social change; if the condition were not met, then they would take over the state of Texas and secede from the United States. In this sense, both Bernard and Belton advocate black agency. In the end, Bernard wins majority support and orders the assassination of Belton, who refuses to cooperate. The organization is exposed by another character convinced of the need for moderation.

Griggs uses the devices of speculative fiction both to expose the injustices of racism in American society, through the experiences of Belton, and to suggest the possibilities of radical change. His Imperium is shown to be an efficient, effective, and democratic political structure that demonstrates the astuteness of blacks in that arena. Thus, even if the organization ultimately fails, it is not because of racial incompetence (the usual attack of the time on Reconstruction), but rather because American society had failed to live up to its own principles.

The final work to be considered combines a number of the elements discussed above. Coming at the end of this period, Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) blends aspects of realistic, romantic, and utopian writing to present his vision of the post-Reconstruction South and its possibilities. On the one hand, he provides careful descriptions of the economic realities of

Southern life, including the nexus between Southern agricultural production and Northern manufacturing, a connection that encourages the exploitation of both black and white labor and that limits black political and social advancement. Later, he moves his protagonist to the North in order to explore the corrupt nature of turn-of-the-century political machines. In these depictions, he offers a somewhat conventional progressivist analysis of American society.

At the same time, he develops a romance narrative that, in part, symbolizes his own views on black life. He creates a protagonist, Blessed Alwyn, who represents what Du Bois elsewhere referred to as the Talented Tenth, that is, those with the intelligence, training, and social consciousness to use their abilities to improve the situation of the race as a whole. In the neighborhood of the school, he meets Zora, a "wild child," who lives in the swamp with her conjure-woman grandmother. She can be seen as a symbol of the folk world of the black masses, represented by Du Bois as instinctive and superstitious. If the story were straightforward allegory, it would show Zora "raised" in status by her relationship with Bles and a marriage at the end that would demonstrate the rightness of the author's social views.

What in fact is presented is more complicated. First, Du Bois breaks with much of the black conventional narrative of the time by making his heroine a fallen woman; she has been sexually violated by the white men of the area with the complicity of her grandmother. This situation leads Bles to break off their relationship as soon as he learns about it from an officious young teacher. But unlike other writers, who would leave her to an unkind fate, Du Bois provides her with the opportunity to determine her own destiny, which she does through both academic and social training. She goes North and then returns to establish a biracial socialist community by converting the very swamp that was the source of her corruption into a highly productive cotton farm. Bles returns as well, but the new Zora refuses to become romantically involved until he demonstrates his devotion to the community. In this sense, we are presented with a New Black Woman for the new century, as well as a radically new South based on economic, political, and social equality.

Black male writers of this era used a range of genres to explore both the threats to and the possibilities of black life in the post-Civil War period. While, with the exception of Chesnutt, much of the fiction is considered minor, in terms of its literary skill and its influence on the writing that followed, it clearly is more far-ranging than usually thought and, in conjunction with the work of women writers, constitutes a significant body of fiction.

African American women writers, 1865–1910

HANNA WALLINGER

From 1865 onwards, African Americans, either recently freed from slavery or as the first generation born after slavery, profited from the increased political and cultural rights of the Reconstruction period. Benefiting from the nation's growing awareness of cultural diversity and a general interest in exotic places, peoples, and local color customs, African American writers, artists, and intellectuals gained more publication possibilities and national visibility. Although the post-Reconstruction decades led to a significant decline in political rights, aggravated the poverty and deprivation of large segments of the black population, and caused wholesale discrimination and violence against them, this period also saw the rise of a generation of active, outspoken, and versatile African American women.²³ Not surprisingly, the decades from the 1880s to the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance are called the Black Women's Era, a term coined by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the foremost African American intellectual who both preceded and shaped this period.²⁴

Literary critics, who began to investigate nineteenth-century African American women's writing in the 1970s, have rescued these writers from oblivion, discovering them to be exceptional, extraordinary, and noteworthy, but also lonely and isolated voices in the white-dominated movements of realism, naturalism, and local color writing. This rediscovery is indebted to the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers and its excellent reprinting of a great number of important texts, and to those enthusiastic scholars who continue to advance a tradition of in-depth scholarship.

Between the end of the Civil War and the opening decade of the twentieth century there were roughly two generations of women writers who undertook the task of presenting the hardships, injustices, and wrongs committed against their race and their gender. Taken together, they formulate a theory of race literature; they write about slavery, its abolition, and its aftermaths of violence in their contemporary period; they rewrite traditional stereotypical images of manhood and womanhood and modify the generic boundaries by mixing melodramatic, sensationalist, utopian, detective, political, romantic, and evangelical forms.

In his introduction to the many ideologies and social realities underlying the terms realism and naturalism, Donald Pizer draws attention to the conflicting theoretical foundations that make it difficult to construct a literary history between the Civil War and the First World War that is inclusive rather than exclusive.²⁵ Somewhere between Howellsian “teacup tragedies” and Frank Norris’s concept of naturalism as exploring the “black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man,” African American literature finds its place as race literature by adopting elements of the prevailing modes of the time. Much like other realist writers, African American women insist on their freedom of expression, their right to depict violence, lynching, and the often cruel legacy of slavery, however unliterary their subject might seem to an audience divided between negrophobia and a taste for local color, the exotic, and a sympathy for African American issues.

The strategies African American writers adopt during the period are threefold. First they change the existing mode of the well-rounded novel by introducing didactic elements (political tracts, the rhetoric of the black women’s club movement, educational advice) when and where possible. Thus, they continue the tradition of earlier African American writers (William Wells Brown and Frank J. Webb in particular) with their intentional display of didactic elements in fiction. Second, they issue a call to arms against prejudices and discrimination, and third, they advocate a retreat into the private and religious. All these strategies put them at risk of being ignored, criticized, undervalued, even openly attacked. The many instances of split personalities, characters who are neither white nor black, who reflect a doubled or fragmented self, speak of the tensions between reality and the longing for a better world. From the point of view of the female writer all the above strategies are steeped in a gender awareness that allocates certain fixed roles to African American women. Torn between the conflicting images of the loose woman, the mammy or servant, the beautiful heroine of mixed-racial origin, and the modern middle-class and educated woman, these writers intend to alert their audience that these stereotypes and expectations are flawed.

Pauline E. Hopkins captures the spirit of this age in two essays about literary women published in 1902: “We know that it is not ‘popular’ for a woman to speak or write in plain terms against political brutalities, that a woman should confine her efforts to woman’s work in the home and church.”²⁶ She acknowledges that the element of race puts an additional stress on women, but is optimistic and hopeful: “Why is the present bright? Because, for the first time, we stand face to face, as a race, with life as it is. Because we are at the parting of

the ways and must choose true morality, true spirituality and the firm basis of all prosperity in races or nations – honest toil in field and shop, doing away with all superficial assumptions in education and business.”²⁷

This task of “doing away with all superficial assumptions” unites this group of African American writers and intellectuals: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Gertrude Mossell (1855–1948), Anna Julia Cooper, Victoria Earle Matthews (1861–1907), Fannie Barrier Williams (1855–1944), Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954), Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman (1870–?), Amelia E. Johnson (1858–1922), Gertrude Dorsey Brown[e] (?–?), Ruth E. Todd (?–?), and Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935). From what we know about them, they were activist intellectuals who pursued careers as race leaders, club women, orators, society leaders, editors, teachers, academics, and professional women. If there is one common trait among them, it is, to use Matthews’s words, their “aiming and striving after the highest.”²⁸ Active and outspoken, they refused to be silenced, demanding that their lives and careers need to be taken seriously today.

Matthews’s speech at the 1895 Congress of Colored Women of the United States in Boston, has been called the “manifesto of the black women’s movement.”²⁹ In “The Value of Race Literature,” Matthews sums up the concerns of her generation. Race literature is regarded as engaged literature, which is literature that has a social and political function to which the writer must be committed; it is a record of the past and can offer a vision of the future; it is typically American. It never means women’s literature with the added aspect of race, because although the differences between male and female writers of African American descent are not regarded as larger than the differences between white and black writers, these women see the values of race literature from what could be considered an early feminist point of view. Matthews claims the need to write against prejudice and injustice and thus juxtaposes race literature with American literature in general. Her view is shared by her contemporaries Harper, Cooper, Hopkins, Mossell, Tillman, and Terrell, who all publicly advocate the importance of literature of and about their race and gender. In various publications they address the issues of race literature and thus, in addition to being themselves writers in this genre, form an early generation of African American literary critics.

One of the main topics in the fiction of this period is the treatment of slavery, its cruelties and long-lasting aftermaths: Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900) exemplify this. Booker T. Washington, the generation’s most influential male race leader, advocated for a literature looking into the future with optimism rather than one highlighting the wrongs

of the past. His well-publicized and often-repeated view that slavery has brought religion and civilization to the former Africans is challenged by both Harper and Hopkins, who present injustice as resulting from the system of slavery and its demeaning effects on both the slave and the slaveholder.

One of the leading African American intellectuals in the nineteenth century, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper spoke and wrote against slavery, for its abolition, for the rights of women, and for political rights for all African Americans. Readers and critics today regard *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892 when Harper was sixty-seven years old, as the representative novel of this age. Her theme is topical, her intention is polemical, her craft is excellent, her appeal to the reader is exceptional, and her eponymous heroine is a memorable literary character. Passing is one of the dominant topics in this novel as well as in her shorter novels *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876–77), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888–89). For Iola, the beautiful young heroine of mixed racial origin raised on a Southern plantation, as for her brother Harry, passing for white becomes the one test of character that challenges their integrity, the one temptation they must and eventually do resist. The Civil War part of the novel allows Harper to present a decidedly realistic and deromanticized depiction by exposing the cruelties and injustices of the battles, the substantial contribution of black soldiers, and the many deceptions and strategies necessary for survival. The latter part of the novel that is set in the North allows Harper to demonstrate that a peaceful and middle-class existence is always fragile and endangered by new waves of violence. Constant watchfulness and untiring labor is needed to secure the rights of black people.

The second most topical novel of the period is Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900) that documents the black women's club movement. Negotiating between private and public spaces, *Contending Forces* shows the continuing concern with the past in a respectable middle-class African American family representative of Hopkins's Boston in 1900. The choice of character, the setting, and the political content reflect the author's deeply felt need to explain the present, especially the terror of mob violence, as a product of the past. Much care is taken to set the tone, describe the setting, and establish an atmosphere of culture, general good intentions, hard work, and delightful enjoyments in the middle-class home of the Smith family. The realistic setting of the narrative is deliberately non-sensationalizing. Contemporary readers of the novel were fascinated by the thinly disguised descriptions of famous men and women of their time, such as Mrs. Willis as the prominent club woman Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Arthur Lewis as a Booker T. Washington-like educator and race leader, and Will

Smith as a mixture between the activist Frederick Douglass and a young W. E. B. Du Bois.

In *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* as well as in Harper's and Hopkins's other novels, intricate plots contain political and ideological discussions about the slave past, the roles of race leaders, the content of racist theories, and the solution to the increasing crimes of rape and lynching. The plots sometimes hide these burning and complex issues by drawing attention to the fates of the heroines and heroes. They function as vehicles for ideological concerns but never let the reader forget that the political is always personal, that the general well-being of the race has to be judged by its individual representative.

Gender together with race and class necessarily also plays a major role. In her second novel *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (published serially under her pen name Sarah A. Allen 1901–2), Hopkins chose as her subject the complex and intricate white and black relationships in the USA and thus continues the tradition of pre-Civil War fiction, in which this topic is prominent. With a cast of white, African American, and mixed characters, Hopkins focuses on the nearly white woman whose trace of black blood leads to tragedy and launches bitter, ironic attacks against a system of double morality. Beauty and virtue, when they are combined with color, highlight a nation's concern with race, class, and the role of women. The issue of passing takes up much fictional space, much as in earlier and later novels by Harper, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Chesnutt, Griggs, Dunbar, and Walter White, and illustrates what Giulia Fabi calls the “transgressive potential of passing as a theme.”³⁰ The crossing of color lines has the power to arouse interest and public controversy. The scene of revelation, a stock trope in most narratives in which a seemingly white man or woman finds out that he or she is legally black, becomes the guiding plot element that stands for the impossibility to determine race on the basis of color alone. *Hagar's Daughter*, for example, revolves around two generations of women light enough to pass for white but with the one drop of black blood that determines their lives. In education and manners, they are not distinct from upper-class white ladies. They pass because their physical appearance is more white than black or because they have no knowledge of their origin. Hopkins, who was certainly aware of the stereotype of the tragic mulatta heroine, offers a gamut of possible roles ranging from the women who decide to pass or live in interracial unions to women who make a conscious choice not to pass. Only Jewel in *Hagar's Daughter* dies a tragic death because she cannot stand the loss of love.

Both Harper and Hopkins recognize the possibilities inherent in the fictional negotiations of color in combination with beauty and virtue. The

fundamental issue at stake here is that of whiteness as a supposedly superior and unquestionable category. To challenge the boundaries of race, as people of mixed-race origin usually must, requires contesting the established nature of progress, civilization, manhood, and virtue as privileges of the so-called dominant race or hegemonic group. The subject of miscegenation and the figure of the mixed-race hero or heroine attract the African American and also other ethnic woman writers because of their aptness and promise and because they allow her, as Mary Dearborn says in *Pocahontas's Daughter*, "to explore her own ambivalence and that of her culture to female sexuality and ethnicity, to protest against the ways in which intermarriage has assumed oppressive meanings and has expressed an oppressive actuality, and to displace into fiction complex social and economic problems."³¹

The one truly manly and heroic character in Hopkins's fiction is Reuel Briggs in *Of One Blood, or The Hidden Self* (1902). Although he decides to pass for white in order to get an education, he achieves an intellectual and moral awareness that allows him the status of an idealized leader of the race who is able to steer his people into a brighter and Pan-African future. Moving between the United States and a utopian underground civilization in Africa, Reuel gains insight into the past of his people and develops the leadership qualities that are his heritage as a descendant of an ancient African royal family. The plot moves back and forth between members of an interracial family who do not know that they are siblings, refers to an inherited ability of clairvoyance, and describes a civilized African state in order to keep the reader fascinated up to the concluding revelation that they are "all of one blood." The novel offers a blending of many dominant thematic concerns of Hopkins's time: history, the roles of mixed-race men and women, the revelation of one's racial past, manliness and heroism, and the future of race leadership. Reuel Briggs is Hopkins's intellectual and manly African American hero despite his occasional paternalistic attitudes toward women. *Of One Blood* is dominated by a vision of a blooming, well-ordered, civilized African culture and society. Hopkins's central argument about the common and unifying bond between all human races allows her to criticize American racist tendencies, to express racial pride, and to call for a revision of history.

In the fiction by Harper and Hopkins, true manhood consists of selflessness, intelligence, courage, physical strength, and also tolerance toward other races and an acceptance of the value of women; true womanhood is tied up with selflessness and Christian forbearance, intelligence, physical beauty, courage, and an attitude of tolerance toward all others. These writers have been criticized for envisioning interracial unions (mostly by contemporary

white critics) and, on the other hand, for being incapable of seeing true heroism in very dark-skinned characters or calling up a happy relationship between a very dark-skinned man and a light-colored or white woman (usually by later black critics). The complexity of this issue reflects the many constraints working not only on these writers but also on their contemporary and later audiences.

In order to place the novels and characters of Harper, Hopkins, and their contemporaries into the literary history of the end of the century, one needs to be aware of the fact that the school of realism and naturalism demands attention to everyday details and encourages local color writing, but that, at the same time, it rejects an overly sentimental, romantic, religious or melodramatic content, all of which can be found in the fiction by African American women writers. A number of critics have undertaken to correct the neglect of the voices of women and minorities in this literature. As will be shown below, new studies about melodrama and sentimentalism, utopian and detective fiction, the use of dialect and folk characters, evangelical and religious content, and humor have contributed to a revised and differentiated picture of the literature of this period.

In *Hagar's Daughter*, Hagar's desperate leap from the bridge in the center of the nation's capital and her near drowning stand for the emotional force of melodramatic content that certainly appeals to the readers of her time and is a stock ingredient in most novels of this age. Later scholars have often reacted negatively to such sensationalist plots. Benjamin Brawley in *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* (1918) and William Stanley Braithwaite in "The Negro in American Literature" (1924), for example, see postbellum and pre-Harlem African American literature as transitional only and as reflecting the lives of African Americans moving between "the two extremes of humor and pathos."³² Underlying the summary dismissal of much writing of this period is the devastating repudiation of their artistic competence in combination with a treatment of the racial situation as too accommodating. Recently such scholars as Peter Brooks, Susan Gillman, and Linda Williams have challenged this view of melodrama. They have shown that morality is at the core of melodrama,³³ allowing nineteenth-century women writers to question the "conflicting demands of racial, sexual, and national identities"³⁴ and letting the weak triumph in their very weakness.³⁵ With an emotional appeal to a sympathetic audience, African American female writers of this time elevated their tales from the realm of the everyday to the exceptional because they wanted to show that the individual beautiful heroine or manly hero speaks of the pains of a race in general.

Much of the fiction of this period can be interpreted as creating an alternative and utopian world in the sense that, as Giulia Fabi argues, the writers inspire their readers to envision a liberated and empowered society in contrast to the dystopian reality of violence and segregation.³⁶ Through race travel, which is Fabi's term for the tropes of miscegenation and passing, the authors and their characters see the normative value of the white world as utopian and summon up an equally utopian world of racial harmony, equality between the races and genders, and a powerful community among all peoples of African descent.

Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's *Of One Blood* are thus interpreted as narratives that envision truly alternative and better societies. This utopian mode dominates short stories that close with a happy union between a nearly white male or female character with his or her white beloved person. A variety of stories collected in Ammons's *Short Fiction by Black Women* (1991) demonstrate that this ending in racial harmony usually results from race travel and leads to true equality or a world where race simply does not stand in the way of true love: Hopkins's "Talma Gordon" (1900), Ruth D. Todd's "The Octoroon's Revenge" (1902), Fannie Barrier Williams's "After Many Days: A Christmas Story" (1902), and Gertrude Dorsey Brown[e]'s "Scrambled Eggs" (1905).

Together with the appropriation of melodrama as a useful fictional tool, several of the narratives of this period appropriate elements of detective fiction. Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter*, Brown[e]'s "A Case of Measure for Measure" (1906), and Ruth D. Todd's "Florence Grey" (1902), for example, feature detective characters. Venus in *Hagar's Daughter* makes clever use of her position as maid to discover family secrets and then disguises as a man to find the clue that will solve the crime and save the heroine's life. As Stephen Soitos and John Cullen Gruesser argue, these early detective characters are precursors of subsequent black crime writing as a vehicle for social criticism.³⁷

The controversial debate about the use or non-use of dialect in African American fiction can stand here to exemplify the generic boundaries between so-called low and high literature. Folk characters, dialect passages, and minstrelsy-like scenes are popular with such white writers as George Washington Cable (1844–1925), Thomas Nelson Page (1853–1922), and Joel Chandler Harris (1845–1908), and such black writers as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. In an analysis of Chesnutt, Sundquist points out the ambivalence between Chesnutt's "clear aspirations to middle-class professional respectability" and his class-conscious employment of dialect speech for so-called minor characters, while most heroic figures would speak standard American English. Sundquist talks about a tension "between

capitulation to stereotypes and the desire to find an audience for African American literature."³⁸ Bethany Johnson sees in dialect writing and the controversial critical debate about it a sign of the many contradictory issues of the time.³⁹ By including and partly relying on dialect, these writers negotiated the expectation of an audience for entertainment and their own need to depict the full range of possible characters with credibility.

These writers see the necessity to describe the details about the home life of their characters and mingle the domestic with the political aspect.⁴⁰ In their fiction Alberta E. Johnson and Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman find ways to comment on race and, more importantly, to imagine the disappearance of racism by mixing the generic modes of juvenile and sentimental fiction, political treatise, evangelical propaganda, and the female *Bildungsroman*. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894), and Tillman's serialized novels *Beryl Weston's Ambition: The Story of an Afro-American Girl's Life* (1893) and *Clancy Street* (1898/99) imagine the home as a place of order, moral guidance, admirable behavior, religiosity and moral purity, as well as political discussion. Thus they accomplish various ends at the same time. First, they prove that African Americans can live in this way and that they strive to do so by sacrifices and endurance in the face of harsh opposition. Sixteen-year-old Beryl Weston in Tillman's story, for example, gives up her college education when her mother dies so that she can take care of her brother and sister and help her father with the farm work. By following a rigid and admirable schedule of work, education, community service, and religious adoration, she grows into full womanhood and is rewarded with not only a suitable husband but also a happy life. Second, Tillman and Johnson, as well as Harper and Hopkins, see the middle-class lifestyles of themselves and their characters as an ideal that allows them to claim superiority over the classes beneath and above them and to ascertain their political power and cultural dominance. By focusing on the admirable roles of young girls growing up into responsibility and assuming ideal Christian lives, these examples of the female *Bildungsroman* become models for a whole generation to follow. In addition, by including political debates, these narratives envision an overcoming of racism by making their characters' lives indistinguishable from comparable white lives. Gender serves as a unifying bond across boundaries of color. These writers address the needs of their audience for moralizing and elevating fiction without, however, sacrificing the political subtext of everyday reality.

Many of the writers in this group were first published in magazines such as the *Christian Recorder*, the *Anglo-American Magazine*, the *Colored American*

Magazine, and the *Voice of the Negro*. These and other weekly or monthly journals offer possibilities for publication unknown to earlier generations. The *Colored American Magazine*, for example, existed between 1900 and 1909. In addition to publishing serialized novels, it features some fifty short stories by male and female writers, most of them African American. Although biographical data are not available about all of them, it can be safely assumed that these writers form a model of African American short fiction that sets an example for later generations. Typical of their age, not all of these stories treat racial issues in an obvious way, but some of them can be singled out because they surpass generic boundaries and introduce a new and fresh treatment of the topic of race, gender, and class.

"A Case of Measure by Measure" by Gertrude Dorsey Brown[e], published in six installments from April to October 1906, is a humorous and deeply ironic story that is part detective fiction, part race literature. The racial and gender issue is played out in various cross-racial actions. Passing is a movement between the races as much as between classes and the movement is in both directions. The rich white girls pass as colored maids, the maid is taken as one of the rich girls, the rich white boys pass as colored servants and bootblacks, a white man passes as a colored criminal, and a colored lawyer passes as a mute waiter. The burlesque masquerade involves a group of white young people attempting to imitate black manners. It takes a serious, even criminal turn with an attempted burglary and near lynching. This is the grimly realistic part of the plot, in which Brown[e] freely alludes to works by Thomas Dixon, one of the most racist writers of the period. At the same time, the comic tone hides the deeply ingrained race prejudices and contextualizes and radicalizes this seemingly comic story.

The issues at the core of these stories and novels are race, class, and gender. In many cases the problems are solved and the mysteries unraveled. In their version of race literature, African American women writers between 1865 and 1910 contribute to the debate about the content of race literature, they tackle the sensitive topics of their time from the slave past to the future of the race, they create memorable heroines and heroes, and then subvert the generic boundaries of fiction. This generation of women intellectuals, activists, club-women, and writers know that their voices will have to be heard and only they themselves can shape and interpret their experiences. In the words of Anna Julia Cooper, who is addressing the convocation of colored clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Washington, DC: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage,

then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.⁴¹ Seen from a later perspective, the achievements of these women intellectuals have to be judged in the context of their time. They contribute significantly to the discourse about race; they reinterpret the slave past with revisionist accounts of either the superior endurance and suffering or the heroism and rebellion of former slaves; they help build up an audience in sympathy with the cause of African Americans and are united in their rejection of lynching and other forms of violence; they further the feeling of loyalty among their people; they demonstrate the values of familial love, labor, education, and community work, most of which is grounded in a Christian framework; they serve as inspiration for future generations of female artists; and they pioneer black feminist studies.

Notes

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“We Wear the Mask”: the making of a poet

KEITH LEONARD

When Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote perhaps his most famous poem, “We Wear the Mask,” he knew of what he spoke. One of the first African American poets to make a living through literature and by far the best known of nineteenth-century African American poets, Dunbar garnered his fame by mastering dialect poetry of the so-called plantation tradition, a mode of writing that used phonetics to replicate a version of African American speech that white Southern writers had created for such stereotypical characters as happy darkies, picaninies, sambos, coons, and mammies. Prominent in the novels and poetry of the period, these characters often expressed their own and their creators’ nostalgia for the days of slavery. With support from some of the era’s best-known writers and critics, some of whom, like regionalist James Whitcomb Riley, wrote this kind of verse, Dunbar traveled the country sharing with his mostly white audiences his versions of the wit and charm and humor associated with these stereotypical characters. Though Dunbar is given credit for writing more “authentic” versions, the mask to which he refers consists of the effects through which the racism, which was embedded in the literary tastes and conventions of the Reconstruction era, covered a truer face of black people. After all, the Reconstruction was the historical moment when the Northern states attempted between 1865 and 1877 to monitor former slaves’ citizenship rights and social fortunes and to rebuild the Southern states after the Civil War. Chafing under the control of such agencies as the Freedman’s Bureau, southerners used these racist images – disseminated in advertising, postcards, newspapers, cartoons, and dolls and figurines, as well as in literature – to validate the superiority of what they saw as a lost genteel culture. Northerners used those same images and stereotypes to sentimentalize the suffering of black people, especially since the Hayes-Tilden compromise that allowed Rutherford B. Hayes to be elected president ended

Reconstruction and led to the bloody reign of the Ku Klux Klan. Within this welter of violence and failed promise, white readers in both regions were comforted by charming tales of a largely contented and inferior people.

Thus, in the line "we wear the mask that grins and lies,"¹ Dunbar was articulating an aspect of the African American modern condition which his poetry forcefully embodied. First of all, he was referring to how African Americans, whether poets or not, had at times to adapt versions of these popular images in their daily interactions with whites in order to survive. Judging by the popular culture of the time, it is clear that mainstream white society had little interest in the true emotional lives of black people and certainly not in their suffering. And Dunbar was undoubtedly referring to the problem of the black poet who operated behind the mask of such poetic conventions and even had to inhabit them, as Dunbar himself did in his public readings. As J. Saunders Redding pointed out, "by a sort of natural development the 'darky' sketches, now so intimately a part of American minstrelsy, hardened into the recognized speech of the Negro" and "set up the limits to the Negro's media of expression ... as a slapstick and a pathetic buffoon."² To make matters worse, Dunbar, like his contemporaries William Stanley Braithwaite, T. Thomas Fortune, Benjamin Brawley, Cordelia Ray, and Albert Allson Whitman, had always originally fancied himself as a Romantic poet, preferring to write poems in Standard English about such serious subjects as lovers, love lost, the beauty of nature, and the possibility of transcendence, ideals best conveyed, he believed, in elevated diction, traditional symbolism and metaphor, and standard Western prosody: blank verse, sonnets, heroic couplets, and quatrains based on Protestant hymns. In other words, all of these poets accepted, at least in part, the premise that this style of writing was nobler – indeed, more "poetic" – than the portrait of ordinary African Americans. Knowing that his readers and audience preferred what he called in his poem "The Poet," "a jingle in a broken tongue," Dunbar catered to that taste. Concluding with "great cries" arising from "tortured souls," while letting the world "dream otherwise," "We Wear the Mask" implies both an ambivalent moral courage necessary to wear the mask and a possible core of resistance emerging while the world passively and ignorantly dreamed its racist fantasy. The mask was burden, protection, and motive for public self-definition.

Almost unwittingly, then, Dunbar effectively declares in this poem a defining African American modernist cultural pursuit, namely the direct confrontation with and manipulation of a mask of racist cultural expectations for the possibilities of an ethnic self-assertion constituted in Dunbar's case by

some of the defining contradictions of postbellum, segregationist society. Though a romantic idealist, Dunbar was also a proponent of race pride; while aspiring to individual distinction as a poet, Dunbar followed Booker T. Washington who advocated racial unity. Like Washington, he believed in vocational education, and yet valued the power of high culture for social transformation. Negotiating these competing political perspectives, Dunbar often expressed his race pride in Standard English poems about fallen heroes like Frederick Douglass or in biblical analogies, as in "Ode to Ethiopia," poems which validate an honorable and active defense of civil rights against racism. At the same time, he accepted the accommodationist, anti-activist principles of Washington, the famous founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama who had declared in his famous 1895 "Atlanta Compromise Address" that blacks should "cast down their buckets" "in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions," not in political activism or pursuits of civil rights. He also infamously declared that "in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach" so that "[i]n all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."³ Even as he embraced Washington's political caution, though, Dunbar criticized Washington's emphasis solely on economic uplift, complicating the tendency of scholars to see his support of Washington as an example of what sociologist, cultural critic, activist, and editor W. E. B. Du Bois called double-consciousness: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁴ But what may have mattered more for Dunbar was Du Bois's solution, neglected by most critics, which was cultural expression as much as political activism: "This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius."⁵ Unlike Du Bois, whose *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) consciously enacts the hybrid mix by which he defined black culture, Dunbar may not have seen fully that this genius could encompass both black folk culture and romantic idealism. But his work proved that it could.

In other words, Dunbar's modernist legacy as a poet is his artistic engagement in this multiple paradox that conservative racial uplift, black folk culture, and Eurocentric poetic conventions and ideals could serve together as the foundation of progressive ethnic affirmation. His version of it derives in part

from his fairly conventional, bourgeois childhood in Dayton, Ohio. Born in 1872 the son of former slaves, Dunbar learned from his Kentucky-born parents various stories, both folk and perhaps true, about the life in slavery. While scholars dispute whether or not his mother spoke in the dialect Dunbar uses so beautifully in his poetry, it is clear that he developed a sense of life in slavery from those stories and was thus arguably connected to the Southern folk tradition despite being born in the North. An ambitious and intelligent young man, Dunbar, who was also the only black student in his high school, was elected class president and wrote the class's graduation poem in 1891. He famously became an elevator operator after graduation because, despite his clear gifts as a writer, he could not get jobs in segregated newspapers and legal offices. After that, with the help of Frederick Douglass, Dunbar became a clerk. While he could not work at newspapers, he published in them regularly, writing both poetry and articles about African American life. At the time, he was also studying well-known European and American poets, including Alfred Tennyson, William Shakespeare, John Keats, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Riley. These influences are evident in his first volume, *Oak and Ivy*, which he published by taking out a loan. Considering his Standard English poems to be "oak," he placed them in a separate section from his "ivy," the dialect poems that would eventually win him fame. Those Standard English poems included "Sympathy," where Dunbar laments with a caged bird about why his trap leads him to sing, a celebration of nature common to Romantic verse that also betrays Dunbar's social anxieties. Nonetheless, despite Dunbar's clear indication to the contrary, in the volume's structure and some of its poems, William Dean Howells praised the volume for how it revealed, at least to him, the sense of African Americans' quaint and inferior place in American society.

Each of Dunbar's major volumes operated more or less with this division in mind and suffered similarly racist praise. *Majors and Minors* (1895) like "oak" and "ivy," separates the "minor" and "ivy" of dialect poetry from the "majors" and "oak" of the Standard English verse. The volume *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) eschews this division but its title signals the triumph of the perception of the folk over the formal poetry. Howells clarified this point in his preface to Dunbar's volume, praising Dunbar's "ironical perception of the negro's limitations": "in nothing is his essentially refined and delicate art so well shown as in those pieces which, as I ventured to say, describe the range between appetite and emotion, with certain lifts far beyond and above it, which is the range of the race."⁶ In effect, Dunbar's place as what Booker T. Washington called "the poet Laureate of the Negro race" derives from this

ability to represent the distinctiveness of black people not in terms of the authentic black culture that twentieth-century critics saw but in terms of social inferiority. The “lowly life” is what matters for Howells, and the alleged realism of what is actually a set of conventions reinforces the racist implication that Dunbar as a poet is good only because he represents a lesser culture in an appropriately lesser form of verse.

But this practice, at the end of the day, is in fact empowering, largely because Dunbar was able, as modernist Ezra Pound declared, to “make it new.” In its arrangement of Dunbar’s two modes of verse, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* created a paradoxical public perception of Dunbar as a romantic, bourgeois poet connected to the folk rather than a poet divided in his craft, making formal literary culture an aspect of “lowly life.” Such associations “elevated” the folk poem for readers like Howells, while for twentieth-century critics it unseated the privilege accorded to Standard English poems. In other words, the volume posited Dunbar as an ironic commentator whose distance, on the one hand, allows him to articulate the moral values through which an African American bourgeois self heroically emerges from and then transcends those stereotypes, while on the other it makes him one with the folk. Juxtaposed side by side, Dunbar’s poems mirror one another, though with distortion, revealing that, in both modes of verse Dunbar portrayed the priorities of racial uplift ideology “on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority and the accumulation of wealth.”⁷ He asserted, in short, distinctive “black” versions of the national ideals of individualism and social mobility, and framed comic and heroic versions of those ideals in each kind of verse. And he reworked established conventions of poetic form to insert the “black” content of the anxiety of double-consciousness. Finally, his verse enacts in part the “uplift” of black people by presenting African American folk culture as precursor to the fulfillment of these deals, the beginning of the “uplift” to bourgeois achievement.

In these terms, Dunbar’s poetic self-fashioning enacts the process of ethnic self-definition that, instead of either putting on or taking off the mask, reworks the mask to reveal the difficulty of articulating a black self fully in the language of Reconstruction-era culture. Dunbar was not, as some critics have suggested, writing his dialect for black audiences and the Standard English for the white, nor was he simply speaking in a double voice, forking its tongue for both audiences at once. Rather he was affirming what he saw to be common values in different cultural forms, a practice that revealed both that which prevented blacks from seeming to achieve those values and the cultural source by which they did achieve it. It is a model of evolution and the erasure of

cultural difference analogous to what Booker T. Washington called the "New Negro" in an anthology of essays and art entitled *A New Negro for a New Century* published in 1900. As Henry Louis Gates put it, "A *New Negro's* use of the key word *progressive* dozens of times [in its essays] related directly to an idea of progress through perfectibility ... Booker T. Washington's New Negro, then, stood at a point on the great chain [of being] head and shoulders above the ex-slave black person."⁸ By showing off photos and cultural expressions of bourgeois African Americans, the anthology sought to demonstrate how those people were getting better, rising in a static chain of human being based upon an allegedly static set of values which African Americans would be living were it not for the impediments caused by racism. In fact, that African Americans were achieving those values was all the more heroic. Similarly, as Darwin T. Turner suggested, Dunbar's short stories "repeatedly emphasized the ability and willingness of Negroes to forgive white Americans for previous injustice" so that his "noble sentiments and protagonists reveal ... that [Dunbar] believed in right rule by an aristocracy based on blood and birth which assured culture, good breeding and all of the virtues appropriate to a gentleman."⁹ Though Dunbar was not as interested in inherited aristocracy as Turner suggests, he was interested in "good breeding" if one understands that concept not in terms of biological selection and improvement but in terms of active self-improvement, the model of cultural self-making that Washington celebrates in his anthology.

In other words, cultural cultivation was both moral cultivation and social advancement for Dunbar, and both of these were components of the heroic self-assertion of racial uplift which functions to motivate American society to recognize and fulfill its highest ideals. High art – romantic poems in Standard English or paintings on biblical themes in European styles – embodied how individual breeding reflected collective racial breeding. For example, in Dunbar's words,

In the Luxembourg gallery hangs [African American painter Henry O. Tanner's] picture, "The Raising of Lazarus." At the Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, I saw his "Annunciation," both a long way from his "Banjo Lesson," and thinking of him I began to wonder whether, in spite of all the industrial tumult, it were not in the field of art, music and literature that the Negro was to make his highest contribution to American civilization.¹⁰

For Dunbar, Booker T. Washington's philosophy of accommodation through industrial training, social segregation, and economic self-assertion was

inadequate because it did not deal with the full complexity and highest faculties of the African American self. Thus, the corresponding “folk” representation of the race in Tanner’s “Banjo Lesson,” where an elderly black man teaches his son or grandson how to play the banjo, was inadequate as well. Ultimately, African Americans must acknowledge that “lower” folk culture in order to move a “long way” beyond it to the expression of individual genius (and the attendant communal validation) available in high art endorsed by the Academy of Fine Arts. Traditional artistic achievement mattered because the social values necessary for full racial harmony were best articulated and most fully enacted there. In other words, even an elevator operator can embody the nobility of national ideals that would lead to social inclusion.

With this deliciously ironic ideal of the moral heroism of “good breeding” in mind, it becomes clear that Dunbar’s verse has certain effects of parody even in his mastery, effects that both fulfill and critique Dunbar’s own ambitions. His humor in his dialect poetry does in fact cut both ways, in other words, poking fun at some aspects of folk culture while humanizing those stereotypes in order to excoriate the whites who believed in those conventions too fully. Unlike his contemporaries Daniel Webster Davis and James Edwin Campbell, for example, fellow black writers of this mode of dialect poetry, Dunbar mastered those conventions in ways that revealed his ambivalence both about the form and about the notion of quaint racial limitations that were passing away. On one hand, then, like Davis and Campbell, Dunbar follows Washington’s practice of criticizing his own race, pointing out how the flaws of his people derived from the legacy of slavery and that constituted both a cause and a consequence of their treatment. As his journalism reveals, Dunbar shared Washington’s, Davis’s, and Campbell’s anxiety that the entire race was judged by its lower classes. At the same time, he would perhaps have concurred with the comments of Richard Linthicum, editor the *Chicago Times-Herald*, in introducing James E. Campbell’s *Echoes from the Cabin and Elsewhere* (1895), that the antebellum Negro “was close to nature ... gave a language to the birds and beasts ... [whose] simplicity and superstition formed the basis for a charming fiction ... [and] gravest utterances were gilded with the quaintest humor.”¹¹ With these contradicting sensibilities about the black folk, Dunbar did write poems about “chicken-stealing darbies,” as in “Accountability,” about a figure who justifies stealing from his master.

But, on the other hand, the innovation of giving character depth to these stereotypes and ironizing them works well to undermine Dunbar’s own sentimentalized nostalgia and occasional racial self-hatred and to assert

something more human to black life. In "The Party," Dunbar fully embraces the stereotype of the happy darky for the sheer ironic enjoyment of it, even to the point of celebrating a stereotypical physical satisfaction as if it were a morally admirable joy of living. Dunbar's poem recounts festivities that the addressed "you" of the poem missed, cataloguing the stereotypical behavior and pleasures of the stereotypical black people who donned fine clothes and put on airs for comic enjoyment. The party is based in part upon the Cake Walk, an African American folk practice in which African Americans, especially slaves, imitated the pretensions of their white owners for comic effect. That ritual competition, in which the best imitators were awarded with the cake, also functioned to elevate the antics of the African parodist into its own kind of pretension. While such practices as these were prime evidence for the apologists for slavery that Africans had been happy as slaves, they were more accurately evidence of the self-awareness and playful satire enacted by those blacks. By portraying such figures enjoying their food and their false pretensions, the plantation tradition poet could poke fun at the African's allegedly failed imitation of white culture while celebrating their former happier state.

In Dunbar's hands, though, it was more like an imitation of a copy of an imitation meant to make fun of the entire convention. The poem becomes parody because it undermines what it embodies through exaggeration. As Linda Hutcheon put it, parody "is granted a special license to transgress the limits of convention, but, as in the carnival, it can do so only temporarily and only within the controlled confines authorized by the text parodied – that is, quite simply, within the confines dictated by 'recognizability.'" In other words, in order to challenge conventions in this way, Dunbar had to produce poems that looked like happy darky poems so that he could engage his readers in transgressing those very codes. The following lines exemplify these effects:

Ain't seen no sich fancy dressin' sence las quah'tly meein' day
Gals all dressed in silks an' satins, not a wrinkle ner a crease,
Eyes a-battin', teeth a-shinin', haih breshed back ez slick ez grease;
Sku'ts all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stitch;
Ef you'd seen em' wif deir mistus, couldn't swahed to which was which.¹²

On one hand, both blacks and whites share the desire for aristocratic hierarchy, for sartorial finery, and for pomp and circumstance. Both blacks and whites enjoy the comedy evoked when black people imitate pretentious whites. It also places Dunbar as poet in a position to exaggerate the conventions of the stereotypes to such an extent – with the eyes and teeth in stereotypic poses – that it would ideally undermine it. And yet, Dunbar's

practice is analogous to that of Bert Williams and George Walker, two African American performers of blackface minstrelsy who had a show in which they called themselves “Two Real Coons.” The paradox of two black men being “real” coons by putting on blackface paint and acting out false stereotypes turns the recognized practice of lampooning black people on its head. It pulls down the mask at the moment that it puts the mask on, allowing Walker and Williams to improve their profits even as they made fun of their own compromises and the falseness of the whole set of conventions they practiced. Likewise, the poem’s extreme versions of this stereotype function like Chinese boxes, producing regressions of meaning that ultimately trap the parody in its own terms.

Moreover, in other poems, Dunbar tempers his own conservatism and polishes the double-edged sword of parody for a sharper aim by validating folk culture in dialect poems in a way that his contemporaries did not. For example, in “When Malindy Sings,” one of Dunbar’s most famous poems, he celebrates the natural gifts of a folk musician, clearly associating those gifts with his own. Instead of looking for laughs, this poem affirms the greater power of the natural musical talents of Malindy over the schooling and precision of Miss Lucy, who could be read either as an educated black person or as a white mistress. It is about the capacity to express oneself in order to make oneself.

Who dat says dat humble praises
 Wif de Master nevah counts?
 Heish yo’ mouf, I hyeah dat music,
 Ez hit rises up an’ mounts –
 Floatin’ by de hills an’ valleys,
 Way above dis buryin’ sod
 Ez hit makes its way in glory
 To de very gates of God

 Oh, hit’s sweetah dan de music
 Of an edicated band;
 An’ hit’s dearah dan de battle’s
 Song o’ triumph in de lan’.
 It seems holier dan evenin’
 When de solemn chu’ch bell rings,
 Ez I sit an’ ca’mly listen
 While Malindy sings.¹³

The praise for Malindy here and as it is repeated throughout the poem is Dunbar’s subtle attempt to work through the minstrel affirmation of the

alleged comic naturalness and unlearned talents of blacks into an affirmation of a vernacular cultural practice. Malindy's gift is a native and untutored appreciation of the divine that redeems the divine itself. After all, her voice is holier than religious rituals ("church bells"), elevating her "humble praises" to an ideal mode of worship. The poem creates a space in which the folk cultural protagonist can be construed as a version of the poet himself and can bring the assumptions of dialect in conflict with Dunbar's pretension to be a great Romantic poet to suggest that African American artists have a greater voice from the folk than has been acknowledged. Malindy can sing the community's pain, bringing them the heaven of emotional solace with her voice, and can do so through a use of language that is otherwise disparaged. And of course, since he wrote the poem, Dunbar can too. Poems like "Banjo Song" and "When the Cone Pone's Hot" imply a tradition of modest solace through music available through the artist figure, paralleling Malindy and the poet as voices of and healers for their community. There is humor here not unlike that of "The Party," or any other dialect poem, and the poem certainly evokes the notion that "they" have their limited accents of "our" music. So the homely values that Linthicum laments as passing are also lamented here, as is the sense of the possibility of perfectibility. But here the butt of the joke is clear: any pretentious educated person who could not appreciate the beauty and validity of folk art. Dunbar is even making fun of himself. But he validates his voice as well.

The premodernist paradox and parody of Dunbar's dialect practice is enhanced by some of his Standard English verse because those poems cast a similar role for the poet and articulate similar homely values as the motivation for poetic voice. For example, "Ode to Ethiopia," one of Dunbar's most anthologized poems, opens by declaring that the race is the poet's muse:

O Mother Race! to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering,
This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,
With thy dear blood all gory.¹⁴

The poet pledges faith to the race and to sing its glory, transforming praises normally reserved for God in the Christian tradition or the muses and gods in the classical tradition into an aspect of this epic invocation of a historical ethnic identity. Also, by referring to the biblical prophecy of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands to God, Dunbar places newly freed blacks in a glorious biblical

history that substantiates the race's and the poet's place in the mainstream traditions of heroic poetry. Moreover, as in the heroic tradition of the West, in which individual heroes almost literally embody their community's values, Dunbar attributes to every individual of the race, including the poet himself, the heroic endurance, the long-suffering pursuit of justice, and the prophecy of future liberation asserted here in collective terms. After all, the poet gets to claim a voice central to that Ethiopian community's values, just as Malindy claimed the folk community's religious traditions. Crucially, this heroic ancestry is both from the Christian tradition of the West and from a distinctive African prophetic faith. While similarly invested in received tradition, then, Dunbar eschews parodic effects here to embrace how that heroic tradition becomes the terms of his "good breeding." A cultured version of Malindy, in other words, the speaker in this poem has a voice that is holier than religious ritual because it is analogous to Homer's in singing a nation.

What makes Ethiopia heir to the legacy and prophecy of biblical Ethiopians, in other words, is the people's slow but discernible fulfillment of Booker T. Washington's version of racial uplift, the black versions of national ideals of individual effort and economic and social self-sufficiency. Of course, in order to do so, one must accept the social inferiority of African Americans and accommodate segregation and racism, swallowing one's pain and resentment to prove the moral heroism necessary for inclusion. But there is something heroic in this sacrifice, isn't there? Dunbar thinks so:

No other race, or white or black,
When bound as thou wert, to the rack,
So seldom stooped to grieving;
No other race, when free again,
Forgot the past and proved them men
So noble in forgiving.¹⁵

As biographer Peter Revell put it, Dunbar is "establishing in the mind of the reader, black or white, the belief that the black citizen has a deserved and meritorious place in the life of the nation."¹⁶ Rather than being predicated on the humor of dialect or the revelation of a truer folk culture sometimes enacted through the parody of parody, that meritorious place depends here upon how, given this resistance to bitterness, "Proud Ethiopie's swarthy children stand" and "stir in honest labor" as "they tread the fields where honor calls;/their voices sound through senate halls/In majesty and power." While the poet joins the heroic tradition of the West through his formal mastery, the race distinguishes itself as heroic and divine through the manual

toil of farming. As awkward as this "nobility" sounds to post-Civil Rights ears, it is a substantive antiracist stance. Bitterness against oppression is no more inherently a proper response to racism than this noble suffering and self-sufficiency. And even if we grant the fact that such bitterness usually emerges from a greater sense of urgency, such bitterness is not necessarily poetically or politically better than the validation of achievement. Perhaps some of the parody implicit in the dialect poetry inheres in this verse, but it is certainly meant to be explicit and uncomplicated validation.

This accommodationist vision validates the reality of the masses of African Americans by tying such patience to the prophetic faith with which the poem opens:

Though hast the right to noble pride,
Whose spotless robes were purified
By blood's severe baptism.
Upon thy brow the cross was laid,
And labour's painful sweat-beads made
A consecrating chrism.¹⁷

Social inferiority and segregation are part of a divine plan in which the principles of self-help will produce substantive resistance to social oppression. That faith is heroic, as are the acts pursued in its name. Those acts may include more direct opposition, though that opposition is not stated here. But the "consecrating chrism" of the "severe baptism" testifies to the social and spiritual "holiness" of this biblical race ordained for its freedom, a race which started with "spotless robes" and was purified even more by its moral heroism. As politics, this vision is accommodationist. As poetry, it is quite beautiful, broadening the accommodation into self-assertion and validating a set of values that motivates Dunbar's genuine if ambivalent version of cultural self-determination. The poem therefore articulates what was called in antiquity the "heroic ethos" of a "heroic society," declared and enacted by the poet, an ethos tied both to the passive moral heroism of uplift and the potentially more active biblical prophecy. And the poem is an ode, part of a tradition of public celebration of a heroic figure, meant to be sung out loud. Mindful of this tradition, Dunbar writes in *rime couée*: a characteristic stanza of the eighteenth-century ode:

It is not just the formal language that dignifies the subject. The mere choice of form asserts a claim that the race and its sufferings and achievements merits the language usually accorded to heroic events in the nation's history, and makes that suffering a religious dedication to endure and to prevail.¹⁸

While this notion of elevating the race to the level of the nation accepts the racial hierarchy of white supremacy, it also suggests that African Americans are their own measure of this heroism, enacting black versions of national ideals that shall be remembered for how much more fully they embodied national possibility in society and, of course, in art.

The power of this complicated, contradictory premodernist engagement with rewriting racist discourse has obvious and meaningful effects. First of all, Dunbar was wildly popular and was able to make a living. Secondly, even after suggesting that Dunbar's claim to fame is his capacity to capture the "negro's limitations," Howells claims that "I accepted [Dunbar's verse] as an evidence of the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all."¹⁹ This ideal of human unity, no matter how often contradicted by action, is the very ideal to which Dunbar rightly aspired, one which is ultimately a meaningful contradiction to racism. Finally, Dunbar's continued popularity among black people since then, and most importantly among black poets, suggests that, though his poetry may not have motivated the social activism the poet claims in "Frederick Douglass," it does create an ongoing tradition of self-making where the oppositions Dunbar sought to maintain between folk and formal were more fully and self-consciously broken down.

For Dunbar and his contemporaries, and for every poet since, the emergence of an artistic representation of a distinctive black culture and of a local color realist literary tradition led to a crucial question: what role should that emerging culture play in art and how should art accommodate that difference? While Dunbar's answer was incomplete, it did suggest fruitful ways in which formalist artistry and traditional poetic achievement – even Romantic genius – could be informed by the distinctive experiences and modes of expression of African American people. If Afro-modernism is, as Mark Sanders defined it, the "claim of historicity, of change, development ... and finally both social and psychic complexity [as] the salient rejoinder to assertions of black absence, antithesis, stasis," then Dunbar's ambivalent balancing of folk and formal, uplift and activism, perfectibility and parody, constitutes just such a resistance.²⁰ Whatever one may think of this strange idea of breeding as resistance, conventional cultural cultivation as activism, it does indeed contain within it a claim of historicity, a sense that African American culture is changing, is in fact defined by change and growth of the race's own making. In this way, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* constitutes the foundation by which African American poets lifted an imposed mask of racism to read and write the masks of their own faces.

Notes

1. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life: The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1984), p. 167.
2. J. Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 50–51.
3. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 219–220.
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 11.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Dunbar, *Lyrics*, p. xviii.
7. Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 23.
8. Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988): 129–155; 137.
9. Darwin T. Turner, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Forgotten Symbol," *Journal of Negro History* 52.1 (1967): 3–10; 3.
10. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Representative American Negroes," in Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson (eds.), *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), p. 15.
11. James Edwin Campbell, *Echoes from the Cabin* (Chicago, IL: Donohue and Henneberry, Printers, Engravers and Binders, 1895), p. 9.
12. Dunbar, *Lyrics*, p. 200.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
16. Peter Revell, *Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979)
17. *Ibid.*
18. Revell, *Paul Laurence Dunbar*, p. 65.
19. Dunbar, *Lyrics*, p. xvii.
20. Mark Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling Brown* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 34.

II

Toward a modernist poetics

MARK A. SANDERS

Though sadly understudied, the postbellum, pre-New Negro era of African American poetry, roughly 1865 to the First World War, looms as a pivotal if not defining moment in the larger sweep of African American poetics and culture. Perhaps one of the reasons for this era's neglect is that prominent Harlem Renaissance poets – James Weldon Johnson and Sterling A. Brown in particular – went to considerable lengths to distance themselves and their generation from the previous one and its alleged political and artistic shortcomings. For them, both the dialect and genteel (or romantic) traditions of African American poetry held little promise for their own artistic projects and seemed to wilt under the pressure of deteriorating racial conditions. Yet New Negro poets confronted many of the same dilemmas, and indeed pursued many of the same agendas as their forebears, suggesting a closer relationship – even indebtedness – that was seldom acknowledged. Perhaps it is this deeply conflicted relationship with the postbellum generation that begins to suggest the era's enduring significance.

Acknowledged or not, the postbellum generation created precedents for negotiating American popular culture and its racial politics, for addressing “mainstream” audiences and tastes shaped by popular culture, and for working within received poetic traditions. In a sense, this generation prefigured modernist poetics by confronting the conundrum of simultaneous insider and outsider status. They were the first to market to a mainstream or popular taste, while attempting to address the needs and expectations of blacks at a particularly dire moment in American racial history. Thus, this generation grappled with philosophical, political, and technical questions that shaped its cultural and political moment, indeed questions that survived for African American poets well into the twentieth century.

To begin, the late nineteenth-century boom in publishing ushered in new literary tastes, particularly the popularity of “local color,” a strategic combination of realism and romance that celebrated regional specificity, especially

that of the South and the Midwest. Because it effectively absorbed the antebellum plantation tradition of the South, transforming Southern romance into a national literature, local color exerted enormous influence on the development of African American poetics. Indeed, local color's depiction of a Southern plantation idyll – replete with benevolent masters and happy, loyal slaves – served to allay anxieties over lingering sectional strife and over the effects of industrialization on the “New South.” In short, local color served as a means of “mourning ways of life being eradicated”¹ in the postbellum modern America. Richard Linthicum, editor the *Chicago Times-Herald*, wrote an introduction to James E. Campbell's *Echoes from the Cabin and Elsewhere* (1895) that aptly illustrated this sense of loss and longing:

Another quarter of a century of freedom and the Negro of slavery days, the Negro of the log cabin and the corn field [sic] will be but cherished memories ...

In his anti-bellum [sic] state the Negro was close to nature. He gave a language to the birds and beasts, and his simplicity and superstition formed the basis for a charming fiction. Melody sprang spontaneously within him, and his gravest utterances were gilded with the quaintest humor.²

Needless to say, such nostalgia relied heavily on the assumption of black subordination. Indeed, antebellum and postbellum American popular culture – advertising, cartoons, dolls, figurines, and more – depicted African Americans through racist stereotypes such as the picanniny, sambo, zip coon, mammy, and Jezebel. But it was the minstrel stage that served as the most ubiquitous form of popular culture. Blackface performers in tattered clothes dramatized the buffoonery of black being in language, costume, and pose. And in turn, dialect poetry by white writers “was designed to exhibit quaintness, and its language and form were molded to the needs of popular pastoral – homely philosophizing by untutored rustics whose simplicity of heart could serve as rebuke to the complexities of urban experience.”³ Marked by awkward pronunciation (often signaled through misspelled words), grammatical errors, and malapropisms, this “broken English” announced the comic feebleness of black speech and thus black being.

So too, this publishing explosion led, for blacks, to an unprecedented access (and pursuit) of mainstream American culture. Older, established venues such as the *A.M.E. Church Review* and the *Christian Recorder* continued to cater to an expanding readership, while new periodicals, such as the *Weekly Anglo-African*, and regional newspapers sprang up all across the nation. Also, increasing numbers of black writers reached wider white audiences through national

periodicals such as *Harpers*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Indeed, producing the first professional black writers, this generation addressed local and national audiences in both the established tradition of protest and the newly available, apolitical mode of *belles-lettres*.

As a result, a new generation of postbellum poets came to the fore with a decidedly different purpose for their poetry, and thus a different orientation to the prevailing traditions available to any postbellum American poet. This group of poets included Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), James Edwin Campbell (1867–95), Charles Bertram Johnson (1880–1955?), Timothy Thomas Fortune (1856–1928), William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962), James David Corrothers (1869–1917), Benjamin Brawley (1882–1939), Daniel Webster Davis (1862–1913), Albery Allson Whitman (1851–1901), Junius Mord Allen (1875–?), James Madison Bell (1826–1902), Charlotte L. Forten Grimké (1837–1914), Henrietta Cordelia Ray (1852?–1916), Aaron Belford Thompson (1883–1929), and of course Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) and his wife Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875–1935). By no means exhaustive, this list serves only to illustrate the burgeoning number of poets publishing in black and “mainstream” magazines and newspapers, as well as publishing bound volumes through commercial, vanity, and African American presses.

This greater access to the mainstream and the formal, aesthetic, and even political demands of popular audiences resulted in an “assimilationist” or “accommodationist” approach in African American poetry of the day. Distinct from the accommodationism often associated with Booker T. Washington, African American poetic accommodation claimed for blacks “full participation in American society, and saw the proper American society to be one in which distinctions based on color had become irrelevant.”⁴

African American poets strove to prove for themselves that they could participate in larger American artistic traditions and thus present themselves as quintessentially American and Western. Such an approach required the assimilation of the dominant poetic languages of the day – romance and dialect – and so of their forms and techniques, and the sensibilities they transmitted.

More specifically, that popular audiences clamored for black dialect required that black poets concerned with the vernacular and folk culture must work within the confining tradition of dialect; nevertheless they are not completely limited by it. As Joan Sherman points out, dialect poetry by blacks also worked to refute more violent stereotypes by offering more positive qualities such as loyalty, religiosity, and humor. So too, black poets were able to infuse the dialect tradition with an element of tricksterism,

therefore disrupting oppressive power relations.⁵ The poetry certainly does not offer fully developed trickster figures such as Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), but at moments presents the voices of the weak and marginal offering satiric and cogent critiques of the powerful. And finally, black poets succeeded in complicating and ultimately humanizing dimensions of African American life and culture largely absent from conventional dialect poetry. Thus, while working within a tradition fully committed to caricature and black subordination, African American poets often altered or refined the tradition to allow for the possibility of black humanity.

In sharp contrast, the romantic tradition served as a reaction to dialect, or perhaps its correction.⁶ Informed by predecessors such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, Alexander Pope, and John Dryden, it also references contemporaries of the Pre-Raphaelites: Algernon Swinburne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Ernest Dowson. It eschews humor and takes up only "serious" subject matter such as injustice and racial discrimination, nature, death, love and faith, and Christianity. In keeping with the gravity of the subject matter, the romantic tradition uses elevated diction, traditional symbolism and metaphor, and standard Western prosody: blank verse, ottava rima, sonnets, heroic couplets, and quatrains based on Protestant hymns, etc. Finally, the romantic tradition is largely lyric (with noted exceptions to be addressed below), reflecting a nineteenth-century form of middle-class gentility.

Despite its critical neglect, this generation of poets bequeathed to their modernist successors a legacy defined by four crucial features: literature as claim to inclusion; production within received poetic traditions; assertion of black female voices and agency; and the use of history as a rejoinder to essentialism.

First, in terms of a fundamental argument for literature in general and poetry in particular, postbellum writers considered "the very existence of a vital black literature as being strong evidence against the ideology of inferiority."⁷ Effectively taking up the Enlightenment argument that literacy and literature were fair reflections of reason,⁸ black writers presented literature as the entrée into the "cosmic brotherhood/Of genius," as Charles B. Johnson put it.⁹ While this argument was by no means new, this generation, because of its size, was the first to articulate it so broadly to a popular audience. Equally as important, in his 1922 "Preface" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson adopted the identical stance as the essential purpose of the collection: "No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior."¹⁰

Closely related, with unprecedented access to mainstream publishers and audiences, this generation was the first to confront the complications of addressing a popular audience while, for some, pursuing a tradition of protest. As a result, these poets worked within poetic traditions ill-suited for complicated portraits of African American life. Furthermore, certain issues could not be addressed; pressing realities such as lynchings, black disfranchisement, or anger in response to deteriorating political conditions were almost entirely absent. While Harlem Renaissance poets would respond differently to the poetic traditions they inherited, and indeed find a more overt protest voice, nevertheless the postbellum generation established the precedent for addressing these dilemmas.

Largely as a result of women's public roles in the suffragist and temperance movements, assertive black female voices became more prevalent in the poetry as well, as we will see in Frances E. W. Harper: a centrality that clearly influenced black female representation in the Harlem Renaissance. Equally as important, this postbellum generation bequeathed to the next a particular philosophical stance, or better yet a strategy with philosophical underpinnings: that history (or historicity itself) can refute the essentialism of stereotypes and the pseudo-science on race. Not simply the retelling of certain episodes of the past – though this would certainly be a part of the strategy – but the assertion of blacks as historical agents, as possessing the quality of historicity, history served as yet another claim to humanity and citizenship. In a very practical sense, this generation begins to institutionalize intellectual production. Organizations such as the American Negro Academy provided support for a growing number of intellectuals; these intellectuals in turn devoted themselves to the creation of what we now call African American history. In particular, biographies of prominent figures served to assert the African American not simply as hero (a figure capable of shaping history), but as a product of history, a figure capable of “change over time,” and thus able to adapt to the demands of democracy and modernization.

Relative to poetry, this stance is less obvious than in academic histories or fiction, but a telling presence nonetheless. For dialect, in which the ahistorical stereotype is the only metaphoric language available, historicity manifested itself, as we will see, only as subtle modifications of the type. In the romantic tradition, though, the use of history operated more overtly in at least two ways. First, the poet asserted her or himself within a broader poetic tradition, thus as active participant in a historical process. Second, specific poets took up the historical past, often through allegory, as a means of commenting on

the present. Within the accommodationist framework in which more overt protest of lynching or disfranchisement, for example, were largely prohibited, the use of history allowed poets to refute the philosophical underpinnings that authorized broad attacks on black civil rights.

One of the most famous and prolific of nineteenth-century black poets, Frances Harper's scope and influence help to illustrate much of what is telling for this generation and the romantic tradition. Indeed, she began publishing her abolitionist poetry in national journals such as *The Liberator* and *Frederick Douglass's Monthly*, as well as in more local African American publications such as the *Christian Recorder* and the *Weekly Anglo-African*. Her first collection, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), enjoyed unprecedented popularity and literary success for an African American writer. *Moses, A Story of the Nile* (1868), *Poems* (1871), *Sketches of Southern Life* (1891), *Atlanta Offering* (1894), and *Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems* (1895) followed, comprising a publishing career that spanned nearly fifty years. Developing the public and polemical dimensions of the romantic vein, her poetry addresses religious themes, racial oppression and injustice, moral uplift, and black self-help. For Harper, the assimilationist frame within the romantic tradition led directly to claims of full humanity through an elevated style that simultaneously asserts her, as poet, as full participant in the honored tradition of *belles-lettres*. Equally as important, Harper wields the historical past, in one of her most successful poems, *Moses*, as a means of commenting on contemporary racial oppression.

In a sense, *Moses* serves as an allegory for the nation, as it attempts to liberate itself from its history of slavery. Moses, perhaps the biblical type for Abraham Lincoln, leads his people to freedom, and so liberates an entire nation. And though the poem omits race in the modern sense, the retelling of the biblical story of Moses is charged with the politics of race and gender as they point to fundamental issues of freedom and justice. In an overt sense, Harper's epic comments on the psychic toll of contemporary slavery. As the Hebrews wander in the wilderness the speaker comments:

If Slavery only laid its weight of chains
Upon the wary, aching limbs e'en then
It were a curse; but when it frets through nerve
And flesh and eats into the wary soul,
Oh then it is a thing for every human
Heart to loathe, and this was Israel's fate,
For when the chains were shaken from their limbs,
They failed to strike the impress from their souls.¹¹

Harper suggests, quite forcefully, that such a toll will outlast the institution. Furthermore, Moses's transformation itself is symbolic of the hope and possibility for a formerly enslaved people. Presented with the choice to side with the oppressor or the oppressed, "he decides to return to his people"; thus, "he has rejected a pleasure-filled life for a life of sacrifice and commitment to a higher goal."¹²

Note, too, the role of form. This forty-page mini-epic invokes the weight and majesty of blank verse in order to relate a national narrative of liberation and redemption. Her diction – "Gracious lady, thou remembrest well/The Hebrew nurse to whom thou gavest thy foundling,"¹³ for example – echoes the King James Bible and mid-seventeenth-century religious epic. So too the measured pace of her iambic pentameter lends the appropriate gravity to the allegory.

Finally, Harper's emphasis on female historical agency also anticipates and influences the ways in which Harlem Renaissance writers, male and female, will respond to the first-wave feminism of their era. For example, Harper features Moses's mother, the Princess, and Miriam as highly influential figures who literally shape the course of history around Moses. Moses's mother orchestrates his original rescue from Pharaoh's infanticidal rampage; the Princess is able to change Pharaoh's mind and thus saves Moses's life; and Miriam sings the song of Passover, and thus the celebration of a God that intervenes in human history on the side of the enslaved:

As a monument blasted and blighted by God,
Through the ages proud Pharaoh shall stand,
All seamed with the vengeance and scarred with the wrath
That leaped from God's terrible hand.¹⁴

That Miriam sings suggests an essential dimension of Harper's poetry beyond *Moses* – female voices and voicing, the personae of outspoken female figures that appear across much of Harper's postbellum poetry. In one sense, a reflection of her public voice as a writer and lecturer, Harper's emphasis on female voices perhaps reaches its fullest articulation in the persona of Aunt Chloe from *Sketches of Southern Life*. Here, Harper presents an insightful and critical black woman commenting on important issues affecting her community. As a kind of correction or rejoinder to the minstrel type of the jovial, loyal retainer, Aunt Chloe criticizes slavery and even celebrates its demise:

When the word ran through the village,
The colored folks are free –
In the kitchens and the cabins
We held a jubilee.¹⁵

Important for Harlem Renaissance writers, Aunt Chloe's outspokenness and assertiveness anticipate Langston Hughes's Madam Alberta K. Johnson poems, a series of poems featuring a vocal and very self-determined black female persona. More broadly, Harper's representation looks forward to the black female personae of Hughes's "Mother to Son," "Mama and Daughter," or "Hard Daddy." Equally as important, Harper's presentation of public female voices influences the ways in which black female agency might be imagined by Harlem Renaissance poets such as Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, or by novelist Zora Neale Hurston, either in the figure of the black female artist herself or in her creations, or both.

Across all of Harper's postbellum collections, this issue of black female voicing complements the larger agenda of protest. Addressing issues of justice and moral self-reclamation for the nation, many of her poems – "The Jewish Grandfather's Story" or "Retribution," for example – address the nation in a quasi-jeremiad mode, calling for a greater adherence to the nation's sacred principles, lest the nation perish. Indeed, the example of "Songs for the People" presents the black female voice singing a song of hope and triumph ostensibly for blacks as they face seemingly insurmountable odds. But it is a poem that declines to invoke race, ultimately calling for "Music to soothe all its sorrow,/Till war and crime shall cease;/And the hearts of men grown tender/Girdle the world with peace."¹⁶ Thus transcending race, the poem is not simply an American anthem, but a Whitmanesque paean to universal humanity. As it adopts Whitman's notion of singing as expression of the irrepressible human spirit, Harper's poem looks forward to all of Whitman's Harlem Renaissance devotees, and beyond to Margaret Walker who will echo her phrase – "for my people." Ultimately, Harper's rhetoric implicitly constructs the black female poet as national prophet, the quintessential American capable of revealing (and excoriating) the soul of the nation.

Offering a distinct yet complementary approach to history, allegory, and accommodationist poetics, Albery A. Whitman also enlisted an elevated style to do difficult political work. He was described by a contemporary as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest of living Negro poets,"¹⁷ and his long semi-epic poetry also takes up the issue of prosodic tradition and mastery in order to address pressing issues of race, freedom, justice, and manhood. Born a slave, and with only one year of formal education, he produced four major works – *Leelah Misled* (1873), *Not a Man, and Yet a Man* (1877), *The Rape of Florida* (1884), and *An Idyl of the South* (1901) – remarkable in their formal ambition and thematic scope. Using ottava rima, the Spenserian stanza, heroic couplets, and

more, his formal range quite intentionally attempts to execute one of his principal aims: to prove black capacity and ability. "Yet I confess," as he explains in his preface to *The Rape of Florida*, "that living instances of real merit *only* will correct the world's judgment and force its respect."¹⁸ Thus, like Harper, his use of particularly difficult Western verse forms is not simply in the service of art per se, but part of a larger polemic concerning black humanity.

Indeed, Whitman's poetry addresses a range of themes and topics including interracial love, honor, race pride, and the eternal quest for freedom and dignity. That for Whitman poetry is "the language of universal sentiment"¹⁹ suggests poetry's supreme purpose is to illuminate eternal truths that transcend temporal limitations such as race hatred or political oppression. If for Shelley poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," then for Whitman poetry "is the voice of Eternity dwelling in all great souls. Her aims are the inducements of heaven, and her triumphs the survival of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good ... A secret interpreter, she waits not for data, phenomena and manifestations, but anticipates and spells the wishes of Heaven."²⁰

Such an approach obligates his poetry to engage a *belles-lettres* tradition too, while commenting on the world as he sees it. As we have seen in Harper, poems of a quasi-epic scale that necessarily take on allegorical implications allow the poet to pursue this larger mission rather effectively. Whitman's *The Rape of Florida* (republished in 1885 and 1890 as *Twasinta's Seminoles; or, Rape of Florida*) serves as an apt example. Addressing the eternal quest for freedom, the poet takes up the Seminole Wars and the US Army's defeat and eviction of the Seminole communities, many of which included runaway slaves and the biracial offspring of blacks and Native Americans:

Oh! Sing it in the light of freedom's morn,
 Tho' tyrant wars have made the earth a grave;
 The good, the great, and true, are, if so, born,
 And so with slaves, *chains do not make the slave!*
 If high-souled birth be what the mother gave, –
 If manly birth, and manly to the core, –
 Whate'er the test, the man will he behave!
 Crush him to earth and crush him o'er and o'er,
 A man he'll rise at last and meet you as before.²¹

Whitman uses a classic Manichaeian allegory – good versus evil, freedom versus tyranny, Seminoles and Maroons versus the USA and Spain – to dramatize the irrepressible human will to freedom and justice. First, the

poem established the Eden-like paradise in which Seminoles and runaway slaves enjoy the freedom that is (or should be) every person's birthright, yet is impossible in the USA:

If tilled profusion does not crown the view,
Nor wide-ranged farms begirt with fences spread;
The cultivated plot is well to do;
And where no slave his groaning life has led,
The songs of plenty fill the lowliest shed.
Who could wish more, when Nature, always green,
Brings forth fruit-bearing woods and fields of bread?
Wish more, where cheerful valleys bloom between,
And herds browse on the hills, where winter ne'er has been?²²

Note here, the relation between "Nature" and freedom; throughout the poem, Whitman presents the bounty and benevolence of nature in association with his characters' natural state in freedom. Indeed, the beauty of nature underscores the truth of freedom, as both combine to illustrate man's pre-fallen state. Furthermore, Florida is the free space to which enslaved blacks escape. The innate will to "Fly and be free"²³ perpetually compels them to resist the unnatural state of slavery and to seek unspoiled nature and personal freedom.

Yet while the principal characters, Atlassa, Twasinta, Oscela, Palmecho, Ewald, and the community of Mickasukie enjoy their idyll, the inevitable intrusion of evil occurs, propelling the drama and reiterating the eternal nature of the quests. The church and the state combine forces to justify slavery and to authorize the US/Spanish attack. And in reaction, the passion for freedom drives the outmanned and outgunned Seminoles: "ah! but the gods inspire/ The freeman who sees freemen by him die! –/ Each soldier's shot but builds the unconquered fire,/ Twasinta's sons come on to rescue or expire!"²⁴ Though their valiant fight forces the tyrants to sue for peace, Palmecho and his followers are taken prisoner at the peace table and exiled to Santa Rosa, Mexico.

There they find land "once trampled by the spoiler's horde," now "green with fields, and sweet with fruitful boughs."²⁵ And not unlike the original Eden of Tampa, this new world's flora and fauna portend the reclamation of the natural state of freedom and equality:

This is a land of free limb and free thought –
Freedom for *all*, home-keeping or abroad, –
Here man is all unhindered, as he ought,
Dreading no priest's rebuke, no despot's nod,
In high respect of Right, the friend of God!
Sole sovereign of himself, by nature throned,

Planting his titles in the royal sod,
 He spreads his reign where labor's might is owned,
 And harvests revenues for which not subject groaned.²⁶

Thus here, with Atlassa and Ewald reunited and the community rejuvenated, the symbolic arc of the epic bends back to its beginnings, with community restored and the quest for freedom complete, at least temporarily.

Ironically enough, both beginning and ending sites of bliss exist outside the USA. On the one hand, the language and idealism for the poem flow directly from Enlightenment rhetoric and America's founding documents. Being endowed by nature to be "sole sovereign of himself," the pursuit "Of life, and liberty, and happiness," the repeated emphasis on "Reason" as a crucial force to maintain the blissful state, all self-consciously echo Enlightenment ideals, and the American founding documents that attempt to make them real. In this sense, the essential "good" of the Manichaeian opposition is an identifiable American good, if only in theory at the moment.

On the other hand, the enemies of liberty are Americans too. They lie, cheat, and murder to maintain and advance their system of oppression. Bondsmen who quest for freedom must escape the boundaries of the United States; Seminoles born free must leave their homeland in order to regain that which is naturally theirs. And finally, the poem leaves the community "Rejoicing in their freedom, long delayed!"²⁷ even further from the borders of the United States.

Perhaps in the context of the dismantling of Reconstruction and the dramatic increase in lynchings, the poem finally asks which side of the Manichaeian opposition the United States will ultimately rest. In an allegorical sense, *The Rape of Florida* suggests the violation of those founding principles; and in that "The manly voice of freedom bids him rise,"²⁸ true believers always carry with them those eternal principles and perpetually fight to make them real. Thus, a final restoration may reside in a locale of the future, a new United States where the true believers finally triumph, where they "Make not celestial joys so sweet as when/They see our earth a heaven – a brotherhood of men?"²⁹

Important too, in this final reading of the implications of allegory, is the issue of race for Whitman. That his hero, Atlassa, is Native American and his heroine is of Native American, Spanish, and African descent further reinforces the implications of the site of freedom being outside the USA. Here the marginal and subaltern, by American standards, serve as the exemplars, the embodiment of the ideals on which the nation was founded – representation

very similar to Orlando Patterson's idea that "those to whom it [freedom] was most denied, were the very persons most alive to it."³⁰

Furthermore, that these "colored" heroes, as well as Rodney of *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, embody "universal" truths necessarily weds them to the "Beautiful, the True, and the Good." Rather than being the butt of the dialect joke, for Whitman "colored man" – the term he preferred over Negro – necessarily joins the larger brotherhood of humanity.

Finally, both Whitman and Harper use history and allegory as a means of manipulating the accommodationist/romantic tradition frames. Within a poetics that prohibited the direct address of lynching, disfranchisement, or Jim Crow, both poets use history, through allegory, to condemn contemporary racial oppression and to call the nation to live up to its founding ideals. Though a pale form of protest for Harlem Renaissance poets, nonetheless, the reframing of the past to confront the injustices of the present and to envision a more promising future would become a common rhetorical move for New Negroes of every stripe.

Another important black romantic, William Stanley Braithwaite, offers another kind of link to the black moderns. If Harper and Whitman offered philosophical positions and rhetorical strategies to be used by the ensuing generation, Braithwaite lent help in a more palpable form. As an editor for several influential publications – chief among them *Poetry Journal* and *Anthology of Magazine Verse* – and as a critic publishing regularly in national periodicals, he helped to shape contemporary tastes, to promote the new "experimental poetry," and to launch the careers of more than one Harlem Renaissance poet. In a sense, the "poet laureate of the colored race"³¹ served as a bridge from the postbellum generation to the Harlem Renaissance by cultivating new voices and new approaches to poetics, and more practically by making mainstream publishing venues more readily available to black writers.

After leaving school at the age of twelve to support his family, Braithwaite began work as a typesetter while voraciously reading his way through the Boston Public Library. He published his first volume of poetry, *Lyrics of Life and Love*, in 1904, and his second volume, *The House of Falling Leaves*, in 1908; he then founded *Poetry Journal* in 1912, and the following year published the first of his annual volumes, *Anthology of Magazine Verse*.

Perhaps more the aesthete than the rest of his generation, Braithwaite pursued poetry as fine art, thus less the vehicle of polemic or moral persuasion. As Lorenzo Thomas comments, Braithwaite "was interested in poetry not as a purely metaphorical discourse but as an effective and elegant means of

preserving and transmitting the multivalent complexities of human existence and of what Matthew Arnold had called ‘the best that has been thought.’”³² His poetic tastes were thoroughly eclectic, ranging from traditional versification to free verse. That Braithwaite helped to launch Robert Frost’s career is telling in this regard. Frost’s deft combination of traditional verse forms and a fully modern poetic sensibility well reflects the range and complexity of Braithwaite’s tastes. Highly respected in mainstream and African American poetic circles alike, he helped to usher in modern poetry as we know it. Writing critical reviews for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the *Stratford Magazine*, and others, Braithwaite promoted white poets such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Amy Lowell, and helped to expose budding Harlem Renaissance poets such as Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen. Indeed, Cullen dedicated his landmark anthology, *Caroling Dusk* (1927), to Braithwaite.

Interestingly enough, Braithwaite’s own poetry remained firmly grounded in the nineteenth century, despite his wide-ranging critical tastes. His use of sonnets, quatrains, regular meters, etc. served the pursuit of standard Romantic themes and in a manner that ignored the existential doubt or epistemological uncertainty that informed the poetry of the younger moderns. “On a Pressed Flower in My Copy of Keats” serves as an apt example:

As Keats’ old honeyed volume of romance
I oped to-day to drink its Latmos air,
I found all pressed a white flower lying where
The shepherd lad watched Pan’s herd slow advance.
Ah, then what tender memories did chance
To bring again the day, when from your hair,
This frail carnation, delicate and fair,
You gave me that I now might taste its trance.
And so to-day it brings a mellow dream
Of that sweet time when but to hear you speak
Filled all my soul. What waves of passion seem
About this flower to linger and to break,
Lit by the glamour of the moon’s pale beam
The while my heart weeps for this dear flower’s sake.³³

A Petrarchan sonnet in the Keatsian tradition, the poem figures the discovery of the carnation in the book as the occasion to experience anew the first ecstatic moments of falling in love. Just as Keats’s speaker rediscovers the thrill of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by opening George Chapman’s seventeenth-century translation, Braithwaite’s speaker opens a volume of Keats’s poetry

as a means of emotional transportation. Indeed, the flower rests on the breeze described in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," invoking the "waves of passion" that perhaps are an analogous reflection on Keats's timeless beauty. Here the poem functions in a classically accommodationist manner. Like Harper or Whitman, Braithwaite uses multiple references to Western poetics to assert the poet as participant, as actor in a Western prosodic tradition.

For dialect's part, its legacy and historical significance are equally complicated. As we have seen, white writers used dialect poetry and its relation to the minstrel stage and plantation tradition as a means of limiting rather than exploring humanizing dimensions of black literary representation. Therefore, black writers' attempts to "gain a hearing,"³⁴ as Dunbar put it to James Weldon Johnson, had little choice but to adopt a tradition largely antithetical to their artistic aims. And so writers such as James E. Campbell, Daniel Webster Davis, Junius M. Allen, and James D. Corrothers produced dialect poetry at once given to black vernacular, yet circumscribed in its ability to pursue vernacular's signifying range.

While he published a number of poems in "Standard English," Campbell's dialect poetry, particularly that of *Echoes*, has established his place in American and African American letters. In keeping with the dialect tradition, Campbell's poetry features old rustics commenting on quaint folkways, delivering humorous and nostalgic portraits. And though his poetry is fully framed by the plantation ideology so clearly articulated by Linthicum, Campbell and his contemporaries, he succeeded in delivering glimpses of complexities in black life not normally found in dialect poetry by white writers. For example, Campbell uses a dialect based on an existing black vernacular, specifically the Gullah dialect of the South Carolina Sea Islands.³⁵ In addition, his poems are capable of a critique. Albeit often muted by humor, this criticism nonetheless targets the privileges whites seem to take for granted. In "Ol' Doc' Hyar," for example, Campbell portrays "the folk-use of fabling to point satire upon human pretense."³⁶ Though from the perspective of the unlettered rustic, the poem narrates Hyar's obsession with money and his disregard for his patients' well-being, and so delivers a satiric critique of the rich and self-absorbed.

Or in "De S'prise Pa'ty," Campbell illustrates a defining tension between the religious and secular worlds in African American life. Though the poem offers itself as yet another portrait of happy-go-lucky blacks preparing for a party –

Bring out my bawnjer, Susan, and Rastus shek de fiah,
De coons am all flockin' in, ur Daddy am ur liah.³⁷

– the poem also notes that Susan has “jined de church,” and therefore will not cross her feet in dance. Thus, the speaker, a featured musician for the festivities, must comment on her as a problematic anomaly:

B'en baptized in Ol' mud Creek, by Reb'ren Pa'son Snow –
 But youse 'lowed ter tu'n de plat an' "Chase de Bufferlo."
 Kin play "Hyuh goes de blue-bud" and "Honey lub, my sweet,"
 An "Lunnon Bridge is bu'nin' down" – but doan you cross dem feet," For Susan
 orful 'ligious an' mighty 'tic'lar, too –³⁸

By the end, another musician, Rastus, plays fast and well enough to convert Susan to the secular world – “W’y bress my soul an’ buddy ef dat ain’ Susan Brown/ ... She done furgot her ‘ligion and dus’n’ cyah ur –!”³⁹ And while the poem ends with the entire community in celebration, the driving tension of the narrative is between secular and religious worlds. For its historical context, the poem perhaps reflects on encroaching modernism and its threat to folkways. As African Americans pursue mainstream culture and its secularizing influences, certain elements of African American culture may be forgotten.

So too, Campbell is capable of a serenity that may suggest a profundity largely absent in conventional dialect. In “When Ol’ Sis’ Judy Pray,” the speaker conveys an arresting reverence for this matriarch of the black community. Indeed, each stanza of the poem illustrates the transformative effect of her prayers. The speaker himself, in fact, is able to hear God through her oration:

When ol’ Sis’ Judy pray,
 De teahs come stealin’ down my cheek,
 De voice ur God widin me speak’;
 I see myse’f so po’ an’ weak,
 Down on my knees de cross I seek,
 When ol’ Sis’ Judy pray.⁴⁰

Again, Campbell’s tribute to an iconic figure in African American culture – the high priestess capable of uniting and transforming her community (we will see her again thirty-odd years later in Harlem Renaissance poet Sterling Brown’s “Ma Rainey”) – is framed within the notion of the “quaint” and “homespun.” The speaker, at first glance, has more in keeping with Thomas Nelson Page’s speaker in “Uncle Gabe’s White Folks” or Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus than with Harper’s Aunt Chloe. Yet Campbell’s poem takes seriously this iconic figure and the transformative power she wields; it in effect pays respect to the figure and the culture, rather than belittling them.

More generally, figures such as Junius M. Allen and Daniel W. Davis delivered the stereotypic figures of the mammy and the sambo, along with the

humor and nostalgia their readers required. So too, they managed subtle references to the cruelty of slavery and to more complex and humanizing dimensions of African American folk life. Perhaps more importantly, these were the first African American poets to attempt, nevertheless, to render folk speech in verse, the first to bend their talents and received artistic vocabulary toward the vernacular. And although ensuing figures such as James Weldon Johnson or Sterling Brown would either reject dialect altogether or reject the approach these poets took, nevertheless their attempt established the precedent, helping to make possible the Harlem Renaissance celebration of folk culture.

As for the romantic tradition, some Harlem Renaissance writers would reject it too as being “escapist” and “derivative,”⁴¹ yet its artistic claim to Western prosody resonates through Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Anne Spencer, and Sterling Brown, as does the political claim to the cultural mainstream.

So too, a figure such as Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., writing in both the dialect and romantic traditions, suggests the quintessential duality of the artistic moment. Where his Standard English poetry champions racial uplift, education, thrift, and the Puritan work ethic (implicitly rejecting the running joke of dialect), his dialect poetry traffics in mostly the same stereotypes we see in Allen, Webster, and others. In this sense, both romantic and dialect tradition poets presaged their modernist progeny in several important ways. In a practical sense, they were the first to lay claim to popular publishing and mainstream audiences, setting a precedent for the black artist as quintessentially American. In a more abstract sense, they were the first to confront the paradox of modern, post-Civil War American race relations. Both citizen and pariah, at once a part of and apart from, they wrote for a mainstream that had already consigned them to delimited frames. These poets were compelled to write in traditions alien to their predicament, and so they were forced to wrestle with form and tradition in order to speak beyond the frames imposed upon them.

In a sense, this double bind is quintessentially modern, a kind of double-consciousness Harlem Renaissance writers will confront head-on. So too, the era’s defining dilemma finds perhaps its clearest articulation through the career of Paul Laurence Dunbar, indeed an artistic bridge from the generation to the Harlem Renaissance.

Notes

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2. Richard Linthicum, "Introduction," in James Edwin Campbell, *Echoes from the Cabin and Elsewhere* (Chicago, IL: Donohue and Henneberry Printing, 1895), pp. 9–10; p. 9.
3. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "The Search for a Language, 1746–1923," in *Black Poetry in America: Two Essays in Historical Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 1–35; p. 15.
4. Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 14.
5. Joan R. Sherman, "Introduction," in Joan R. Sherman (ed.), *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 1–14; pp. 12–14.
6. Sterling A. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 45.
7. Bruce, *Black American Writing*, p. 2.
8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25.
9. Charles Bertram Johnson, "Negro Poets," in *Songs of My People* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), pp. 9–10; p. 10.
10. James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922).
11. Frances E. W. Harper, *Moses, A Story of the Nile*, in Maryemma Graham (ed.), *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 34–66; p. 63.
12. In Graham, *Complete Poems*, p. 16.
13. Harper, *Moses*, p. 39.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
15. Frances E. W. Harper, "The Deliverance," in *Sketches of Southern Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Ferguson Bros. & Co., Printers, 1891), p. 10.
16. Frances E. W. Harper, "Songs for the People," in Graham, *Complete Poems*, p. 162.
17. Bruce, *Black American Writing*, p. 33.
18. Albery A. Whitman, "Preface," in *Twasinta's Seminoles; or, Rape of Florida*, rev. edn (St. Louis, MO: Nixon-Jones Printing Co., 1885), pp. 7–10; p. 8.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 37

30. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. ix.
31. Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 67.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
33. William Stanley Braithwaite, "On a Pressed Flower in My Copy of Keats," in *Lyrics of Life and Love* (Boston, MA: Herbert B. Turner & Co., 1904), p. 37.
34. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 160.
35. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama*, p. 36.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Campbell, "De S'prise Pa'ty," in *Echoes from the Cabin*, pp. 19–21; p. 19.
38. *Ibid.*
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40. Campbell, "When Ol' Sis' Judy Pray," in *Echoes from the Cabin*, p. 44.
41. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama*, p. 46.

PART II

★

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Foundations of African American modernism, 1910–1950

CRAIG H. WERNER AND SANDRA G. SHANNON

The map of African American cultural life during the first half of the twentieth century has always been organized around Harlem. From the late 1910s through the mid-1930s, the high water mark of what is variously known as the New Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance, the section of Manhattan spreading out from the axis of 125th Street and Lennox Avenue was the epicenter of an explosion of creative activity. Painters and poets, jazz musicians and blues singers, actors and orators, dancers and composers, poets, playwrights, and novelists all crowded the nightclubs, lecture halls, and salons, creating a ferment which justifies Langston Hughes's celebration of the era as a time when "the Negro was in vogue." Attracting artists – a few of them white – from every corner of the United States and the African Diaspora, Harlem provided a laboratory where cultural traditions forged in response to slavery and the economic brutality of the post-Reconstruction era crashed up against "modernity," the constellation of forces which had been transforming European and European American society and psychology at a steadily accelerating pace since the original Renaissance.

While what took place in Harlem illuminates the new aesthetic and political possibilities opened by that encounter, New York was only a part of a much larger story. Between 1910 and 1950, African American life was shaped by two major wars; a depression which redefined American political and economic life; the rise of a union movement with, at best, a mixed record on racial issues; the dawn of a Cold War and a Civil Rights Movement shaped in part by global politics; and, perhaps most centrally, what historians have termed the "Great Migration." As Paul Gilroy has demonstrated in *The Black Atlantic*, complicated migratory cross-currents have been a central historical fact ever since the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade. But the relocation of some 7 million African Americans from the rural South to urban areas throughout the United States combined with the massive social dislocations in the wake of the

First World War to create unprecedented possibilities for black expression. Between 1910 and 1950, African American writers, musicians, and visual artists, equally aware of black vernacular traditions and European American modernism, forged distinctive forms to impart the social and spiritual meaning of black lived experience at a time of accelerating change.

Modernism itself is an inherently unstable term. Literary historians including Lillian Robinson, Houston Baker, Barbara Foley, Ann Douglas, and Michael North have effectively asserted the need to decenter notions of modernism as a loosely unified movement in western European and Euro-American aesthetics. Historically, however, the current of "High Modernism" represented by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and James Joyce (1882–1941) exerted a disproportionate impact on African American literary history. Younger writers (and near-contemporaries) embarking on literary careers understandably turned to the most widely celebrated (and vilified) of the established writers for models that they sometimes embraced, sometimes rejected, and always reshaped. As demonstrated in Frederick Karl's *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885–1925* and Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's anthology *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930*, Euro-American modernism was self-consciously experimental, obsessed with developing new forms of expression to represent radically new forms of human consciousness. Modernism originated in the perceived collapse of stable authorities capable of arbitrating morality, politics, aesthetics, human relationships, or even, after the emergence of non-Euclidean geometries and relativity, scientific truth. Contemplating urban wastelands and the devastated landscape left behind by modern warfare, the modernist self experiences a profound sense of fragmentation and alienation, variously understood in political (Marxist) or psychological (Freudian) terms. The locus of meaning shifts to the artist who, in the words of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, goes forth "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."¹

What "creating the conscience of a race" meant for African American writers differed in both obvious and subtle ways from what it meant for their white contemporaries. Confronted with the conditions of life facing most migrants to the industrial cities of the Northeast, the Great Lakes region, and, slightly later, the West Coast, black modernists certainly shared the general sense of psychic and social alienation. Their sense of the origins, meaning, and possible responses to the malaise, however, grew directly out of the specific circumstances of African American history. Far from being a new experience,

fragmentation had been the organizing element of black life since Middle Passage. Uprooted from their geographical, cultural, and linguistic homes, slaves were forced to adapt to a world in which nothing could be trusted. As a result, as Sterling Brown (1901–89), Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), and Langston Hughes (1902–67) recognized, the folk culture of the Black Diaspora anticipated many of the key modernist questions. Even though they evinced no desire to return to a past defined by slavery and segregation, black modernists sometimes expressed a selective nostalgia for communal rituals that had been deformed or destroyed by modernity. Like T. S. Eliot turning to the seventeenth century which had given birth to the forces which created the waste land, African American modernists at times found themselves suspended between an old world dying and a new one yet to be born.

As they negotiated these tensions, black writers were acutely aware of what W. E. B. Du Bois described as “double-consciousness,” which he defined in an 1897 essay and later reworked as the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Derived from the work of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), the experience of double-consciousness was not unique to African Americans. Women, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and members of immigrant groups all confronted stereotypes and social boundaries. But where many of those groups – Italians, Jews, and Slavs – had the potential to follow the path described by Noel Ignatiev in *How the Irish Became White*, the forms of double-consciousness encountered by even the most successful African Americans proved largely intractable. Enshrined in the legal system and supported by pseudo-scientific notions grounded in nineteenth-century taxonomies of race, black “difference” remained an organizing principle of American life.

Not surprisingly, double-consciousness provided both a central theme and a structural principle for many African American modernist texts. Written in the decade following Du Bois’s formulation, James Weldon Johnson’s (1871–1938) novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) gave classic expression to the psychological, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the dilemma. While the emotional textures of Claude McKay’s (1889–1948) “White Houses” (1922) and “Tiger” (1922), Countee Cullen’s (1903–46) “Yet Do I Marvel” (1925) and “From the Dark Tower” (1927), and Hughes’s “Dream Variations” (1924) and “I, Too” (1925) differ sharply, all respond to the presence of an uncaring, and sometimes openly hostile, white world. Similarly, although Jessie Redmon Fauset’s (1884–1961) *There Is Confusion* (1924) and Richard Wright’s (1908–60) *Black Boy* (1945) view the world from near the antipodes of the black class structure, both

share a sense of the difficulty of attaining a self-consciousness which is not predicated on white preconceptions.

Double-consciousness played out not only in the relationship between blacks and whites, but also within the African American community in relation to gender, sexuality, class, and color. Echoing the themes of nineteenth-century womanist discourses, black women poets (Georgia Douglas Johnson [1886–1966], Anne Spencer [1882–1975], Helene Johnson [1907–95], and Alice Dunbar-Nelson), playwrights (Marita Bonner [1899–1971] and May Miller [1899–1995]), and novelists (Hurston, Fauset, and Nella Larsen [1893–1964]) insist that no adequate understanding of black life can be reached without equal attention to women and to men. Focusing on the internalization of white supremacist notions of color, especially the preference for light-skinned spouses among the middle and upper classes, Wallace Thurman's (1902–34) *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) chronicle the ways in which double-consciousness distorts even the most intimate experiences. Although few of them placed homosexual themes at the center of their work, gay and bisexual writers were active participants in the Harlem Renaissance, among them Alain Locke, Cullen, Thurman, R. Bruce Nugent (1906–87) (one of the few who acknowledged his sexuality publicly and whose novel *Gentleman Jigger* written 1928–33 was not published until 2008), and Hughes, whose sexuality remains a subject of some controversy.

Formally, double-consciousness manifested itself in the form of an array of stylistic approaches which have been theorized as “masking.” (See also Chapter 7 in this volume.) Developed during slavery as a survival strategy, masking presents an image which superficially adheres to white expectations and stereotypes. Creating a space within which African Americans can communicate with one another in coded forms, the approach relies on a shared understanding of the ironic distance between image and reality. In the introduction to her fascinating work of autobiographical ethnography *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston delineated “The theory behind our tactics: ‘The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the floor of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.’”²

While masking has been attacked as a vestige of the self-demeaning minstrel tradition, it also presented a range of aesthetic opportunities compatible with the modernist fascination with ambiguity. Saying their say and

singing their songs with an awareness of the white presence, African American modernists developed a range of literary strategies, which Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has explored under the rubric of “signifyin(g).” For Gates, African American expression is “double-voiced,” based on intricate manipulation of linguistic motifs, including poetic images and narrative patterns. Working at the crossroads of cultural traditions, African American artists both paid homage to and subverted white modernism. Seen in these terms, Marita Bonner’s play *The Purple Flower* (1928) signifies on the expressionist drama of August Strindberg (1849–1912), Georg Kaiser (1878–1945), and Eugene O’Neill (1888–1953); Bruce Nugent’s *Smoke, Lilies, and Jade* (1926) on impressionist painting; Hughes’s *Feet o’ Jesus* on the imagism of Pound and H.D. (1886–1961); Melvin B. Tolson’s (1898–1966) *Dark Symphony* (1941) on Wyndham Lewis’s (1882–1957) vorticism; the folk plays of Willis Richardson (1889–1977) and Georgia Douglas Johnson on John Millington Synge’s (1861–1909) Irish vernacular drama; Margaret Walker’s (1915–98) *For My People* (1942) on Carl Sandburg’s (1878–1967) populist modernist epic *The People, Yes*; Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and Wright’s *Lawd, Today* (written mid-1930s, published 1963) on the mythic approach of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). Separately and together, these works represent a sustained assault on conventions of this literary genre. Like Joyce, Pound, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), William Faulkner (1887–1962), and William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), African American modernists blurred the lines between prose and poetry to create radically new kinds of books. Exemplifying the Afro-modernist use of black vernacular material (folklore, music, preaching), Jean Toomer’s (1894–1967) *Cane* creates a stunning montage which, like Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, Book I (1946; complete version 1963), transforms a set of seeming fragments into a unified aesthetic whole.

The “wholes” which emerged in African American modernist texts differed in important ways from those in the Euro-modernist classics. In her germinal essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Zora Neale Hurston theorizes *angularity* and *asymmetry* as aesthetic strategies which resist and decenter cultural conventions associated with whiteness. Hurston’s description of angularity resonates with Duke Ellington’s (1899–1974) variations on familiar melodies, Meta Warrick Fuller’s (1877–1968) experiments, and Gwendolyn Brooks’s (1917–2000) reworking of the Petrarchan sonnet in her “The Children of the Poor” (1950). “Everything [the Negro] touches becomes angular,” Hurston writes. “The pictures on the walls are hung at deep angles. Furniture is always set at an angle. I have instances of a piece of furniture in

the *middle* of a wall being set with one end nearer the wall than the other to avoid the simple straight line.”³ Angularity is a specific instance of a larger aesthetic of asymmetry. Noting the paradoxical coexistence of “rhythm and lack of symmetry,” Hurston describes a sense of pattern which recurs in Ellington’s “Black, Brown and Beige” suite, in Jacob Lawrence’s (1917–2000) series of paintings of the Great Migration, and in Hughes’s “Montage of a Dream Deferred” (1951): “There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry.” Hurston concludes by observing that the aesthetic challenges of asymmetrical works are “easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo.”⁴

Building on Hurston’s theoretical foundations, Ed Pavlic revoices the “African American” or “diasporic” strains of modernism as “crossroads modernism.”⁵ Tracing the genealogy of the approach to a constellation of West African cultural practices, Pavlic uses the crossroads – a familiar trope in the blues and black preaching as well as in Yoruba religion – to mark the point of intersection between “horizontal” (social, political) experience and vertical (psychological) experience. The horizontal axis represents the social world where the interaction between individuals is framed by social conventions, political pressures, and public modes of discourse (including conventional artistic forms). The vertical axis represents the inward-looking complexities of consciousness, focusing attention on characters’ disoriented and disorienting attempts to make sense of their lives on levels deeper than those afforded in the horizontal world. The distinctive aspect of African American modernism is its insistence that these two modes be brought into contact with one another. The formative texts of crossroads modernism – the poetry of Hughes and Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), and “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1946) – mark attempts to bring horizontal and vertical awareness into alignment in a (white supremacist) culture which aggressively simplifies and denies African American humanity.

Although Fenton Johnson (1888–1958) and James Weldon Johnson (who were not related) began their careers prior to the Harlem Renaissance, both writers negotiated the crossroads in ways which anticipated the work of younger, self-consciously modernist, writers. Born into one of Chicago’s relatively affluent African American families, Fenton Johnson benefited from unusual educational opportunities, attending both Northwestern University and University of Chicago, where he encountered the work of

modern poets struggling to forge a truly American voice. Aware of the expectations that black poets would employ the dialect forms popularized by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Johnson bridged popular literary forms at the turn of the century and those that characterized the New Negro Renaissance in his experimental work.

Johnson's three consecutive collections of poems – *A Little Dreaming* (1913), *Visions of the Dusk* (1915), and *Songs of the Soil* (1916) – mark a struggle to free his poetic voice from the constraints of the dialect tradition on one hand and of Victorian poetic conventions on the other. Like James Weldon Johnson, Fenton Johnson searched for an appropriate way to negotiate the evolving tensions between meaning and form in the black vernacular as it engaged the aesthetics of modernism. Johnson's struggle not to sentimentalize and exoticize the "Negro condition" but to capture the essence of his people overcame the anxiety of influence and moved him to pursue more vigorous, more experimental forms. Paradoxically, these new forms emerged out of the familiar dialect tradition, for, as Michael North argues in *The Dialect of Modernism*, "dialect became the prototype for the most radical representational strategies of English-language modernism."⁶

The poems in Johnson's first published collection, *A Little Dreaming*, which appeared at a time when white audiences were strongly influenced by editor William Dean Howells's (1837–1920) championing of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poetry, reflect the stylistic and thematic double-consciousness fundamental to African American modernism. The January 14, 1914 issue of the *American Review of Reviews* praised Johnson's initial collection for its "natural spontaneous lyricism with the same distinguishing racial qualities that characterize the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the 'primitive' and 'plaintive' effectiveness of his chant form, comparing it to the spirituals."⁷ Employing the stilted diction characteristic of nineteenth-century English poetry, poems such as "Children of the Sun" mix images of political struggle with images reminiscent of the spiritual, musical darkies of the plantation tradition:

Children of the Nazarene,
Children who shall ever sing
Liberty! Fraternity!⁸

Even as he responded to Dunbar and the English Romantics, Johnson was working to craft a voice responsive to African American folk forms. Anticipating James Weldon Johnson and Jean Toomer, "Singing Halleluiah: A Negro Spiritual" reproduces stereotypically familiar images of a celestial choir awaiting the heaven-bound speaker content to yearn for the hereafter.

But "The Creed of the Slave" provides unmistakable indications of underlying bitterness:

Go crack yo' whups, an' break dis flesh o' mine
 Ah ain't a-gwine tuh leave dis love behin';
 Ah wu'k an' bleed fu' dose dat hu't me mos'.⁹

Johnson's third collection, *Songs of the Soil*, his darkest and most pessimistic, includes his first unambiguously modernist work. The best poems in the collection, notably "Tired" and "The Scarlet Woman," are characterized by a tone of despairing resignation in the face of a hostile urban environment. Johnson's double-consciousness can be seen in the tension between the expansive, Whitmanesque lines modeled on those of fellow Chicagoan Carl Sandburg, and the despairing, fatalistic vision of "Tired":

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many.
 It is better to die than to grow up and find that you are colored.
 Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our destiny. The
 stars marked my destiny.
 I am tired of civilization.¹⁰

The fallen woman in "The Scarlet Woman," like the speaker in "Tired," has given up on all of the virtues that have sustained black people through the years and has resigned herself to a less-than-honorable role in society:

All the stock I had was a white girl's education and a face that
 enchanted the men of both races.
 Starvation danced with me.
 So when Big Lizzie, who kept a house for white men, came to me
 with tales of fortune that I could reap from the sale of my virtue
 I bowed my head to Vice.
 Now I can drink more gin than any man for miles around.
 Gin is better than all the water in Lethe.¹¹

Like Fenton Johnson, James Weldon Johnson received an education which allowed him to see life on both sides of the Du Boisean veil. After attending Atlanta University and Columbia University, he entered the civil service, holding posts in Venezuela and Nicaragua. A touchstone of African American modernism, his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) shared Fenton Johnson's awareness of double-consciousness as a psychological, social, and aesthetic phenomenon. But where Fenton Johnson turned away from dialect, James Weldon Johnson concentrated on redefining the possibilities of the African American vernacular, a move that would prove

crucial to the linguistic experiments of Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, and Ralph Ellison (1914–94), among many others.

Johnson's early work vacillated between Standard English and dialect verse reminiscent of his friend and mentor Dunbar. Working with musicians Rosamond Johnson (his brother) and Bob Cole, he had collaborated on a number of songs which, while commercially successful, flirted with stereotypical representations of black life and language. In contrast, his first volume of literary poetry, *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), employed a standard, sometimes stilted, poetic language to assert a strong commitment to black equality. The title poem, "Fifty Years," commemorates the fifty-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation with an unambiguous assertion of blacks' right to full citizenship:

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.¹²

More importantly, Johnson began to reconceptualize the possibilities of African American vernacular traditions. Strongly influenced by Walt Whitman's (1819–92) *Leaves of Grass* (first version 1855), he began to view African American folk language, especially that of preachers, as a poetic resource capable of tapping into the deep images and rhythms of African American life. Writing in the "Preface" to the 1922 edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson pinpointed the problematic connection between dialect and literary images which denied African American humanity. "Negro dialect is at present a medium that is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America," Johnson writes, "and much less is it capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology."¹³ Against the minstrel tradition, Johnson calls for an art modeled on that of Synge, who adapted Irish folk materials to the modern stage. "What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish," Johnson argues. "He needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without."¹⁴

To realize this goal, Johnson focused specifically on black vernacular expression. Like modernist composers Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), Béla Bartók (1881–1945), and Duke Ellington (1899–1974), Johnson turned to the folk tradition as the basis for "serious" works of art. Modeling his approach to

that of "a composer [making] use of a folk theme in writing a major composition," Johnson catalogs the poetic resources of black language: "imagery, color, abandon, sonorous diction, syncopated rhythms, and native idioms." In the "Preface" to his ground-breaking collection of poetry *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), Johnson meditated on the "old-time Negro preacher,"¹⁵ as an equivalent of the West African griot, who maintained the cultural memory of the community through a combination of poetry, genealogy, and history, all presented in oral form. The preacher, Johnson wrote, "was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory, that at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else."¹⁶ Emphasizing the performative aspects of black language which would occupy the center of African American modernist masterpieces, including Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Johnson endorsed a sense of the black voice which incorporated diverse intellectual, spiritual, and emotional registers: "He was a master of all the modes of eloquence. He often possessed a voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap."¹⁷ The range of the performance reflected an equal range of intellectual reference.

The old-time Negro preachers, though they actually used dialect in their ordinary intercourse, stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect. It was really a fusion of Negro idioms with Bible English; and in this there may have been, after all, some kinship with the innate grandiloquence of their old African tongues. To place in the mouths of the talented old-time Negro preachers a language that is a literary imitation of Mississippi cotton-field dialect is sheer burlesque.¹⁸

The powerful free-verse sermons that comprise *God's Trombones* realize the aesthetic agenda Johnson had set out in the "Preface" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Poems such as "The Creation," and "Go Down Death – A Funeral Sermon" ring with the cadences of the African American vernacular, while "Let My People Go" concludes with a ringing stanza which drops the mask of religious language to issue a political call which echoes "Fifty Years":

Listen! – Listen!
All you sons of Pharaoh

Who do you think can hold God's people
When the Lord God himself has said,
Let my people go?¹⁹

By the second decade of the twentieth century, when the Negro was not “in vogue,” he was “a problem.” While James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and W. E. B. Du Bois represented the voice of a particular group of the educated elite, the masses of black folk were responding to an aggressive black nationalist organizer who had immigrated from Jamaica. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and his powerful Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) gave substance and focus to ideas of racial consciousness and solidarity that attracted many African Americans who found their lives far short of the American dream. Faced with a political continuum that extended from Locke’s cultural pluralism and Garvey’s black nationalist politics to Du Bois’s notions of the Talented Tenth, and the conservative iconoclasm of H. L. Mencken’s (1880–1956) protégé George Schuyler (1895–1977), African American writers of the 1920s and early 1930s broke with the perceived limitations of the past and sounded a clarion for aesthetic self-determination.

Changes in the economic, political, and intellectual spheres contributed to the new set of possibilities. The continuing development of an industrial economy in the Northeast, around the Great Lakes, and, slightly later, on the West Coast created new opportunities for workers who had previously been relegated to the backbreaking work of the agricultural sector. Second, black veterans returning from Europe after the First World War brought with them a new determination to force America to live up to its professed ideas. Their presence, combined with tensions over access to industrial jobs, sparked a series of race riots in which white supremacists rampaged through black communities. During what James Weldon Johnson labeled the “Red Summer” of 1919, riots swept cities and towns from Chicago, Philadelphia, Omaha, and Bisbee, Arizona to Charleston, Knoxville, Norfolk, Virginia, Longview, Texas, and Elaine, Arkansas. Third, the death of Booker T. Washington in 1915 opened new spaces in the public sphere. While it is impossible to come to any simple judgment concerning Washington’s legacy, during his lifetime he possessed what amounted to a veto power over African Americans seeking access to influential white liberals.

As they grappled with the rapidly changing social milieu, African American writers, like their European and Euro-American counterparts, produced a set of manifestos which called for the creation of new types of art. Calling for and embodying a shift in literary representations of the Negro, the manifestos

sounded a defiant, questioning, and ultimately empowering discourse. Alain Locke's (1886–1954) *The New Negro* (1925), Marita Bonner's "On Being Young – a Woman – and Colored" (1925), and Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) share a sense of urgency coupled with a newfound sense of agency. Repudiating the masks of humility and sentimentality they associated with writers of earlier eras, the manifestos embraced a bold, stinging rhetoric of resistance and passionate arguments for literary representations of blacks by blacks and sought to extend that call across gender lines.

Addressing both his fellow writers and the nation's cultural establishment, Locke's *The New Negro* unapologetically asserts culture as the key element of a broader move toward African American self-determination. After serving as the guest editor for the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*, published with the title *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, Locke incorporated the material he had assembled into the groundbreaking anthology published as *The New Negro* eight months later. Locke's introductory essay set out a vision of African Americans as equal contributors to the larger modernist movement. His intention in bringing together a multigenerational set of writers including Toomer, Hurston, Cullen, Nugent, Hughes, McKay, Fauset, Angelina Weld Grimké (1880–1958), James Weldon Johnson, Du Bois, and Walter White (1893–1955), as well as artist Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1894–1962), was "to document the New Negro culturally and socially, – to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years ... and, more importantly, to let the Negro speak for himself."²⁰ Held in stark contrast to an "old Negro," who was more of a myth than a man, Locke's "new Negro" was envisioned to be the product of a *black* sensibility rather than the white gaze.²¹ Locke offered alternative ways of experimenting and working through paternalistic conventions in order to focus upon the inner life of the Negro rather than upon the broad-strokes myth and stereotype. He reasons in "Negro Youth Speaks," a second essay in his *New Negro* collection, that, by taking an essentially modernist approach, writers can access a clearer path to the Negro's inner life – a path that leads away from the "social bogey or a social burden."²² He writes:

The newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art. Nowhere is this more apparent, or more justified than in the increasing tendency to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom of style may become a contribution to the general resources of art. In flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose, verse and music, color and tone of imagery, idiom and

timbre of emotion and symbolism, it is the ambition and promise of Negro artists to make a distinctive contribution. Much of this is already discernible.²³

Seeking to provide writers with a path out of the restrictive black dialect toward a liberated language which better reflects the Negro's reality, Locke endorsed the strategy employed by James Weldon Johnson, who "[transposed] the dialect motive and [carried] it through in the idioms of imagery rather than the broken phonetics of speech." He notes further, "under the sophistications of modern styles may be detected in almost all our artists a fresh distinctive note that the majority of them admit as the instinctive gift of the folk spirit."²⁴ By transforming the folk traditions into modern art, Locke argues, Negro artists can have a real political impact. Even as he dismisses Garveyism as a "transient, if spectacular, phenomenon," Locke envisions a diasporic consciousness in which African Americans play a "constructive and universally helpful" role in connecting "the scattered peoples of African derivation."²⁵ Locke's largest claim, however, relates to the role of art in the political advancement of blacks within the United States. Calling on the New Negro to "lay aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization," he elevates the artist to the central role in the larger social drama. No longer forced to devote his writing solely to the political struggle, he can redirect his energy "from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression." He continues, "The especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships."²⁶ Locke's position marks a strikingly modernist departure from the tradition of Frederick Douglass (1818–95) and W. E. B. Du Bois. Aesthetics, not politics, provides the key to "the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress. No one who understandingly faces the situation with its substantial accomplishment or views the new scene with its still more abundant promise can be entirely without hope."²⁷

Questioning Locke's optimistic tone, Marita Bonner's "On Being Young – a Woman – and Colored" complicates the notion of double-consciousness in ways that anticipate the ideas of "triple jeopardy" which would become a touchstone of late twentieth-century African American womanism. Aware of both white supremacy and black male chauvinism, Bonner satirizes images that deny black women's subjectivity:

So – being a woman – you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden – and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not

wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.²⁸

Bonner uses images of asphyxiation, blindness, and silence. "You decide that something is wrong with a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; hedging in, pressing down on eyes, ears and throat. Somehow all wrong."²⁹

Unlike Locke, Bonner has no clear vision of how to escape or transcend the dilemma. Reaching outside the binary formulations of race and culture, Bonner turns to Buddhism to articulate her sense of black women's spiritual burden and potential. In Bonner's hands, Buddha becomes the metaphor for the black woman's muted existence. As Margo Crawford notes, Bonner employs the image of Buddha "to counter the stereotypes that deny black women's aesthetic sensibilities and femininity."³⁰ Buddha's primary characteristics – silence, strength, and knowing – capture the collective ethos of African American women:

But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha – who brown like I am – sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands. Motionless on the outside. But on the inside?
Silent.
Still ... "Perhaps Buddha is a woman."³¹

The third of the major Harlem Renaissance manifestos, Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," was written as a rejoinder to the caustic attacks from black conservative satirist George Schuyler, whose essay "The Negro Art-Hokum" (1926) was a cavalier dismissal of the legitimacy of Negro art. Like Bonner, Hughes complicates double-consciousness, in this case by emphasizing the importance of class. Perceiving an implicit preference for whiteness in the attitudes of some black writers, Hughes focuses on the psychological impact of a bourgeois upbringing.

One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.³²

Hughes forcefully denounces this binary and challenges younger artists to accept the inherent beauty in their own culture:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are

glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.³³

Where the manifestos helped set the terms for a set of critical debates which would continue over the next three decades, the flowering of African American modernism would not have been possible without the presence of a variety of black organizations and the emergence of a new set of publishing venues. As David Levering Lewis documented in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, the literary activity of the 1920s was part of a broader cultural sphere, which included financial, social, and artistic elements. New Negro writers interacted directly with white modernists such as Eugene O'Neill, William Carlos Williams, and H. D. at events sponsored by patrons such as Charlotte Osgood Mason (1854–1946), Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964), author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), and African American heiress A'Lelia Walker (1885–1931). While African American writers frequently commented on the stereotypical, often primitivist, attitudes held by even the most liberal whites, the contacts gave them access to a broader audience as well as the pages of prestigious magazines such as Harriet Monroe's (1860–1936) *Poetry*, which published Hughes's work alongside that of Pound and Eliot, and *Story*, which awarded Richard Wright the prize that jump-started his literary career.

More central were the magazines devoted primarily to African American writers. Several of the venues for poetry and fiction were connected with established Civil Rights organizations. *Opportunity*, the monthly magazine of the National Urban League from 1923 to 1949, published work by McKay, Cullen, Eric Walrond (1898–1966), Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Gwendolyn Bennett. Founded by Du Bois, *The Crisis* was published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Especially when Jessie Redmon Fauset assumed the position of literary editor in 1921, the magazine became a primary outlet for the new generation, publishing work by Hughes, Cullen, Toomer, and Anne Spencer, while featuring cover art by Aaron Douglas. Both magazines sponsored contests aimed at discovering new talent. Rudolph Fisher (1897–1934) and Arna Bontemps (1902–73) gained their first recognition when they won *The Crisis's* Amy Spingarn Contest, while Hurston, Cullen, and Hughes were honored by *Opportunity*. The list of magazines which contributed to the ferment of the 1920s included *Half Century Magazine*, directed specifically to the interests of the growing

black middle class, and the short-lived *Abbot's Monthly*, which published Wright's first story in 1931. Edited by Wallace Thurman, *Harlem* and *Fire!!* were self-consciously iconoclastic magazines modeled on the European avant-garde. Anthologies such as Cullen's *Caroling Dust* (1929), Charles Johnson's *Ebony and Topaz* (1927), and James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* began the process of establishing a Harlem Renaissance canon. Reflecting the diasporic sweep of black modernism, Nancy Cunard's *Negro* published work by Du Bois, Hurston, Hughes, Locke, and Sterling Brown alongside the writing of African, West Indian, and European writers (including a young Samuel Beckett's [1906–89] translations of two essays on jazz). Willis Richardson's *Plays and Pageants of Negro Life* (1930) documented the outburst of theatrical activity associated with the Little Theatre Movement championed by Du Bois, Locke, Fauset, and James Weldon Johnson. Repudiating the minstrelsy of popular reviews like *Shuffle Along* (1921), groups such as Harlem's KRIGWA, Cleveland's Dumas Players (whose theater was named Karamu House, after the Swahili for "joyful greeting"), the Pekin Theater of Chicago, and New York's Lafayette Theatre provided outlets for plays written by Willis Richardson (*The Deacon's Awakening* [1920], *The Chip Woman's Fortune* [1923]), and Georgia Douglas Johnson (*A Sunday Morning in the South* [1925]).

The writers whose work filled the magazines, anthologies, and theaters came from throughout the diaspora. Of the nearly two dozen writers whose work appears in the "Harlem Renaissance" section of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, only Cullen was raised in New York (and even he was born in Louisville, Kentucky.) A few of the era's prominent writers followed the path from South to North, as did a majority of the approximately 7 million participants in the "Great Migration," which historians usually date from 1900 or 1910 to 1940. James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston were born in Florida, playwright Willis Richardson in North Carolina, Alice Dunbar-Nelson in New Orleans. A larger group was born and educated in the long-established black communities of Philadelphia (Jessie Fauset, Alain Locke), Boston (Angelina Ward Grimke, Helene Johnson, Marita Bonner) and Washington, DC (Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, Bruce Nugent). Arna Bontemps, born in Louisiana, was raised in Los Angeles, Fenton Johnson and Nella Larsen in Chicago. Conservative journalist George Schuyler grew up in Syracuse, Rudolph Fisher in Providence, Anne Spencer in West Virginia. Hughes was born in Missouri, but was raised mostly in Lawrence, Kansas, with shorter stops in Illinois, Ohio, Colorado, and Mexico. Born in Texas, Gwendolyn Bennett lived in Nevada and Washington, DC before her family

settled in Brooklyn. Perhaps the most unlikely point of origin was that of Wallace Thurman, raised in the tiny black community of Salt Lake City, Utah. Several key Renaissance contributors had been born in the Caribbean, among them Marcus Garvey and Claude McKay (Jamaica), Eric Walrond (Barbados), Jacques Roumain (1907–44) (Haiti), and Arthur Schomburg (1874–1938) (Puerto Rico), who played a key role in documenting African American cultural history.

The writers' geographical backgrounds, matched by those of the major visual artists and musicians of the period, contribute to a body of work which provides a fascinating overview of the African American encounter with modernity. The memories of the rural "past" chronicled in Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930) form a montage alongside the urban portraits in McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932), and Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929). Several of the most powerful works of the period are built around juxtapositions between the South and the North, among them Toomer's *Cane*, Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926), and Rudolph Fisher's "City of Refuge" (1925), which paints a bleak picture of a Southern migrant whose failure to read the codes of the city results in his harshly ironic fall. Reflecting the author's upbringing as the daughter of a West Indian man and a Danish woman, Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), like James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, contrasts the racial codes of the United States with those the protagonists encounter on forays into Europe.

The most significant aspect of the expanding geography, however, concerned the African Diaspora. As Tony Martin demonstrates in *Literary Garveyism*, the UNIA newspaper *Negro World* provided a forum for poetry and fiction as well as for Pan-Africanist polemics.³⁴ In addition to Garvey and his wife Amy Jacques Garvey (1885–1973), who published a column devoted specifically to the concerns of black women, the list of the paper's contributors included Hurston, W. A. Domingo (1889–1959), Hubert Harrison (1883–1927), T. Thomas Fortune (1856–1928), Arthur Schomburg, and Eric Walrond, whose short story collection *Tropic Death* (1926) explored the parallels between race relations in the United States and the Caribbean. While Jamaican Claude McKay distanced himself from Garveyism, many Garveyites embraced his novel *Banjo* (1930) as a call to diasporic consciousness. Rejecting the Dunbar-esque dialect which he had employed in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), both poetry volumes written before he moved to the United States, McKay's breakthrough collection *Harlem Shadows* (1922) combined nostalgia for the islands ("The Tropics in

New York”) with a sharp critique of white supremacy (“America”) and vignettes of everyday life (“The Harlem Dancer”). Written in the wake of the Red Summer of 1919 – with race riots in major cities throughout the USA – and a series of violent labor disputes, McKay’s sonnet “If We Must Die” was received as a call for diasporic militancy: “If we must die, O let us nobly die,/So that our precious blood may not be shed/In vain.”³⁵ The concluding couplet, invoked during the Jamaican independence movement of the 1950s, the US Black Power Movement, and the South African Soweto uprising, both of the 1970s, has provided a touchstone for diasporic movements ever since: “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”³⁶

Diasporic literary consciousness extended into writers born in the United States. Langston Hughes’s autobiographies *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956) chronicle the poet’s journeys to Africa, Haiti, and Cuba as well as Soviet Central Asia, Japan, and Spain. Engaging the diaspora as both a folklorist/ethnographer and a spiritual seeker, Hurston established herself as a foundational diasporic theorist in *Tell My Horse* (1937) and part II of *Mules and Men* (1935), which explores the African presence in the vodun culture of New Orleans. The growing awareness of what Paul Gilroy has called the “roots” of African heritage and the “routes” which connected the various corners of the diaspora generated numerous poems reflecting on the question Countee Cullen framed in “Heritage” (1925), “What is Africa to me?”³⁷ Meditating on the difficulty of finding real information about Africa, “a book one thumbs listlessly til slumber comes,”³⁸ Cullen raises questions concerning stereotyping, alienation, masking, and the role of Christianity in political and psychological colonization. Imagining a black Jesus who understands his pain and anger, Cullen concludes with a bitterly ironic vow to restrain his rage:

All day long and all night through,
One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood,
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the dryest flax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.³⁹

For other writers, however, the growing consciousness of Africa as a real place, in contrast to the largely symbolic sense of Ethiopia, which played a role in nineteenth-century black nationalism, served to encourage exchanges with the multilingual populations of the African Diaspora. Most immediately, the Harlem Renaissance exerted a strong influence on the Négritude movement forged during the 1930s by African and Caribbean writers of French descent, on its Latin American equivalent Negrismo in Cuba, and on the South African Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s. First used by the Martiniquan writer Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) in his 1939 poem “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” (“Notebook of a Return to My Native Land”), Négritude asserted a collective black identity based on the shared experience of oppression. Césaire had written a dissertation at the Sorbonne on the Harlem Renaissance and played a key role in disseminating the writing of Hughes, McKay, Toomer, and Cullen among the Paris-based group that at various times included René Maran (1887–1960), Paulette Nardal (1896–1985), and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001). Deeply impressed by McKay’s novel *Banjo*, Senghor wrote that “Claude McKay can rightfully be considered the true inventor of Négritude. I speak not of the word, but of the values of Négritude... Far from seeing in one’s blackness an inferiority, one accepts it, one lays claim to it with pride, one cultivates it lovingly.”⁴⁰

Just as the cultural ferment of the era affected writers outside the United States, the “New Negro” Movement extended beyond Harlem. Before, during, and after the 1920s, other cities – Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Atlanta – played host to their own version of the “New Negro” (and in the case of Chicago, the “Newer Negro”) Renaissance. Many of the writers associated with Harlem entered the literary world via Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “S Street Salon” in Washington, DC. A key feature of a rapidly changing cultural landscape, the Salon provided younger writers, including Hughes, Cullen, Bonner and Fauset, an opportunity to meet established figures such as Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, as well as prominent white writers including Rebecca West (1892–1983), H. G. Wells (1866–1946), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950), Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931), and Waldo Frank (1889–1967).

With the coming of the Great Depression, the center of African American cultural life gradually shifted away from the East Coast. As economic conditions worsened, an increasing number of writers began to place political concerns, often articulated in Marxist terms, at the center of their work, leading to characterizations of the late 1930s and 1940s as a period of “proletarian writing,” “protest literature,” or “the School of Wright.” Since the

publication of Robert Bone's essay "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance" in 1986, however, a growing number of scholars have placed Chicago at the center of the cultural narrative.⁴¹ The idea of a black Chicago Renaissance – not to be confused with the predominantly white movement centered on Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), Carl Sandburg, and Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941) during the 1910s and 1920s – acknowledges the importance of the city's cultural institutions and broadens the focus in ways that make it easier to acknowledge women's contributions to African American modernism. Chicago's importance stemmed from both cultural and institutional factors. As migrants streamed North from New Orleans, Mississippi, and Arkansas, the city became a center for jazz, gospel, and blues, the latter two combining with mainstream pop music to create soul music. The list of Southern-born musicians who made their base in Chicago included jazzmen Louis Armstrong (1901–71) and Earl Hines (1903–83), blues masters Howlin' Wolf (1901–71) and Muddy Waters (1913–83), and sacred singers the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and Mahalia Jackson (1911–72), whose renditions of Thomas A. Dorsey's (1899–1993) compositions defined modern gospel music.

In addition, Chicago was home to three institutions which exerted a strong influence over African American writing: the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, whose editor Robert Abbot (1870–1940) had championed the Great Migration by urging southerners to move North; the Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932) Fund; and the Sociology Department of the University of Chicago. The Rosenwald Fund provided funding for a broad range of African American intellectual activity, assuming a role filled during the Harlem Renaissance by individual patrons such as Charlotte Osgood Mason and Carl Van Vechten. Among the writers who received Rosenwald support were Hughes, McKay, Hurston, Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, classical singer Marian Anderson (1897–1993), and Katherine Dunham (1909–2006), whose research in the Caribbean helped increase awareness of diasporic culture. Perhaps even more important for the long-term development of African American literary culture was the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology, where black alumni such as Charles S. Johnson (1893–1956) and E. Franklin Frazier applied the theories of Robert Park (1864–1944) in developing influential approaches to the problems of urban life – familiarly known as ghettos. Building on the theories of Robert Park, *Black Metropolis* (1945), authored by Horace Cayton (1903–70) and St. Clair Drake (1911–90), established perspectives that would continue to exert a strong impact on the understanding of African American culture. Although the Chicago school's research played a major role in the legal campaigns culminating in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954,

its assimilationist premises and sociological vocabulary, which tended to obscure differences within black communities, contributed to critical approaches which often reduced black texts to “representative” expressions of social unrest designed to increase white awareness of the “problems” of black life.

Heralded by a 1937 issue of *New Challenge* magazine co-edited by Wright, Marian Minus, and Dorothy West (1907–98), who had previously announced the emergence of a “young Chicago group,” the Chicago Renaissance combined political concerns with a deeply musical sense of the African American vernacular. In addition to Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) the issue featured a group of emerging talents including Frank Marshall Davis (1905–87), Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden (1913–82), and Ralph Ellison, as well as established writers Alain Locke and Sterling Brown. Several important works of the 1930s and 1940s were set in Chicago, notably *Native Son*, Theodore Ward’s (1902–83) drama *Big White Fog* (1937), first produced by the Chicago Federal Theatre Project, Marita Bonner’s *Frye Street* (written late 1930s), and the poems of Gwendolyn Brooks.

Playing a role equivalent to Locke’s *The New Negro*, Wright’s essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing”⁴² sounded a clarion call for the development of a modernist art fully responsive to both racial and economic forces. The key, Wright argues, lies in combining the experiential and emotional clarity of African American folklore with the analytical tools provided by Marxism. Organizing his essay in accord with Marxist dialectical principles, Wright begins with a stark contrast between the world views embedded in black literature and folklore. “Negro writing,” he writes, has been either “a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of ‘achievement’” or “the voice of the educated negro pleading with white America for justice.” Presenting the folk tradition as the antithesis to this integrationist thesis of the black bourgeois, folklore “rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of value in life as it is lived, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old.” The implications of this, Wright asserts, are revolutionary: “And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.”⁴³

Wright shares the Marxist belief that economic forces, rather than race per se, are the key to channeling this energy in constructive directions. Careful not to surrender to the type of emotional fervor Marxists referred to as “unscientific,” he cautions that “anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning,

structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control."⁴⁴ In order to fulfill their revolutionary role, however, black writers must "accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them." Writers wishing to "depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships" must possess "a deep, informed and complex consciousness," capable of molding "the fluid lore of a great people" with "the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today." Rejecting the strain of Marxist aesthetics which limited writers to the creation of straightforwardly heroic tales meant to inspire the proletariat, Wright endorses formal complexity. "Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles," he writes, "with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom."⁴⁵ Echoing Joyce, with whose work he was intimately familiar, Wright defines the task of the African American writer in distinctly modernist terms: "He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die."⁴⁶

Many of the writers who responded to the call for a revolution which was at once Marxist and modernist were supported by the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal program which employed Wright, Hurston, Ellison, McKay, Margaret Walker, Willard Motley (1909–65), William Attaway (1911–86), Arna Bontemps, and Theodore Ward (see Chapters 13, and 14). Attaway's novels *Blood on the Forge* (1941) and *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939) which focuses on two white protagonists traversing the Depression-era landscape, Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936), based on the Gabriel Prosser (1776–1800) slave rebellion, and Wright's short story cycle *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) sound the dominant themes of the era's political writing: an insistence on class as a central category of analysis; an awareness of the ways in which capitalism creates a false consciousness dividing members of the working class from one another; and an agreement on the need for revolutionary change. Similar themes echo in Sterling Brown's "Strong Men" (1931) and "Southern Road" (1931), as well as Hughes's poems "Good Morning, Revolution" (1932), "Goodbye, Christ" (1931), and "Revolution" (1932). The final stanza of Margaret Walker's poem "For My People," a Whitmanesque epic which draws on the sonorities of the King James Bible to trace the African American freedom struggle from its origins in slavery to a visionary future, expresses the central dominant tenor clearly:

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written
in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of

final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.⁴⁷

Without question, Wright played a crucial role in the literary scene of the 1930s. After the publication of *Uncle Tom's Children*, the literary left anointed Wright the spokesman for radical African Americans, a position he solidified as a writer for the Communist Party USA newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. The Left's enthusiasm for Wright resulted in part from the final story in the original version of *Uncle Tom's Children*, "Fire and Cloud," which had won first prize in a prestigious contest sponsored by *Story* magazine in 1937. Almost immediately, however, Wright's writing began to stir uneasy responses among his ideological supporters. Although *Native Son* was widely reviewed as a piece of Communist propaganda, many on the Left, including the *Daily Worker's* literary critic Mike Gold, recognized that the novel expressed deep doubts about the sufficiency of Marxist ideology to account for the full range of African American experience. Disillusioned with the Communist decision to suspend the campaign for racial justice after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Wright left the Party and in 1944 published a sharply critical essay "I Tried To Be a Communist," which severed any remaining ties. His autobiographical narrative, *American Hunger*,⁴⁸ published originally in shortened form as *Black Boy*, combined a continuing awareness of economic oppression with a renewed emphasis on the existential realities of black life. The massive commercial success of *Black Boy*, which focuses entirely on Wright's experience growing up in the South and ends with a hopeful vision of life in the North, obscures the fact that the full version reveals the hope as in large part a delusion. While Wright broke with the Left and later established strong ties with French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), he never backed off his searing criticism of American racism or capitalist exploitation.

In part because of the commercial success of *Native Son*, a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the basis for a successful Broadway play, aspiring authors found themselves pressured to write sociologically oriented exposés of the seamy and often violent undersides of urban life. Among the writers who found their work received, and often obscured, by the white literary world's interest in Wright were Attaway, Willard Motley (*Knock On Any Door*, 1947), Ann Petry (1908–97) (*The Street*, 1946), Chester Himes (1909–84) (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945), and Frank Yerby (1916–91), who, after failing to find a publisher for his protest fiction, went on to become the best-selling black writer of his generation with a series of romantic historical

novels signifying on Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Writers who resisted Wright as a model often found their work ignored, simplified, or misunderstood. The initial reviews of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, complained about the absence of a clear political agenda, at times going so far as to accuse Hurston of minstrelsy.

As the 1940s drew to a close, amidst the convergence of forces which would coalesce into the Civil Rights Movement, a generation of African American writers emerged, many of whom resisted pressures to place their writing at the service of political ideas. Ralph Ellison was only six years younger than Wright, but his work, like that of Gwendolyn Brooks and James Baldwin (1924–87), was received by the predominantly white literary establishment as a rejection of propaganda and an embrace of “universal” literary themes. While Ellison was determined to resist the ghettoization of black writing, he was intensely aware that the “universality” of African American writing was deeply grounded in specifically black cultural traditions. His 1945 essay on Wright's *Black Boy*, “Richard Wright's Blues,” advanced a definition of the blues which illuminates the primary concerns of African American modernism at the midpoint of the twentieth century. “The Blues,” Ellison wrote, “is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the Blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”⁴⁹

Providing a way of balancing the brutal experiences of racial history with the “universal” concerns of love, family, and morality, the blues impulse was a powerful presence in two works which occupy the crossroads between social and psychological concerns: Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). Hughes's modernist epic, equivalent in breadth and depth to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, H.D.'s *Trilogy* (1944), or Wallace Stevens's (1879–1955) *Harmonium* (1923), charts the political and psychological vectors of black modernity. Writing with incisive wit and political fire, Hughes creates a jazz symphony incorporating the voices of “Old Negroes” grounded in Southern folkways, “New Negroes” responding to the dizzying pace of urban life, respectable women and their wayward children, preachers and hustlers, aspiring intellectuals, and people doing their best to pay the rent. In the poem “Dream Boogie” (1951) Hughes asks the question which ties the book together:

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard

The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?⁵⁰

Assuming an asymmetrical, angular pose, Hughes returns to the image repeatedly, most famously in "Harlem" (1951), which warns that, if the dream remains deferred, the result may be apocalyptic. "Maybe it just sags like a heavy load," Hughes ruminates. "Or does it explode?"⁵¹

The poems in Gwendolyn Brooks's debut collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, approach a set of similar questions as they resonate in the lives of a gallery of characters inhabiting Chicago's South Side. While Brooks rarely addresses political issues in ideological terms, the realities of poverty and racism provide the atmosphere in which the Bronzeville residents breathe. Writing in a voice which alternates between the vernacular directness of "Queen of the Blues" and the baroque intricacy of "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," Brooks chronicles the lives of people struggling to live with dignity and grace in a world which offers them little encouragement. While Brooks sometimes seems to be content with small dramas of everyday life, the sonnet sequence "Gay Chaps at the Bar" which focuses on a group of Second World War veterans attempting to adjust to civilian life, points to the global concerns which would play a central role in the Civil Rights Movement. When *Annie Allen* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950, the honor was in some sense shared with the ancestors James Weldon Johnson called the "Black and Unknown Bards."

By the midpoint of the twentieth century, writers such as Brooks, Wright, and Hughes had realized most of the goals set out by Johnson and Alain Locke during the heady years of the Harlem Renaissance. The African American literary tradition had weathered the storms of the Great Depression and explored new ways of negotiating the tension between the psychological and political realities. Beginning in the world of Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells (1862–1931), and Paul Laurence Dunbar, African American modernism charted the path to the world of James Baldwin, Ella Baker (1903–86), and Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72), and, despite the continuing resistance of the gatekeepers of American culture, commanded the attention of serious readers on both sides of the Du Boisean veil.

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The New Negro Movement and the politics of art

EMILY BERNARD

"It was the period when the Negro was in vogue," writes Langston Hughes in his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea* about the period commonly known as the New Negro Movement or Harlem Renaissance. In this sentence, Hughes captures two key characteristics of the New Negro Movement. First, it was a period during which blackness, writ large – "The Negro" – even more than black art per se, was in fashion. In addition, the word "vogue" in this sentence is instructive. Hughes reminds us that fads are temporary, and every vogue must die; identities perish, too. New ones are born, of course, and the New Negro Movement was as much concerned with the creation of a fresh African American identity as it was with the demise of the old. "Progress" was the watchword of this movement, but every step forward demanded a look behind. More than progress, the theme of the New Negro Movement is contradiction.

In historical terms, the enormous step forward represented by the New Negro Movement cannot be overstated. The Harlem Renaissance was occasioned by the Great Migration. At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans found themselves grappling with a host of factors that were pushing them out of the South and pulling them toward the North. The "push" factors in the South included an increasing degree of racist violence and repression; natural disasters (both a boll-weevil infestation and a drought); and a lack of viable job opportunities. The "pull" factors in the North were simple: more freedom and better jobs. From the vantage point of the American South, big urban centers, like Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit, looked like places where black people might have a fair chance at a future, particularly when the United States entered the First World War in 1917, and scores of able-bodied white men vacated their jobs and joined the armed forces. By 1920, hundreds of thousands of African Americans had left the South and taken up residence in Northern industrial cities.

Life in the North was more complicated than it looked from down South. Rural black laborers discovered too late that they had been lured to the North in order to break the strikes organized by white (largely immigrant) workers attempting to unionize. And black people who had fled the escalating violence in the South saw the North erupt in brutality, as well. The summer of 1919 was known as the “Red Summer,” and riots broke out in Washington and Chicago, as well as Charleston, South Carolina, Longview, Texas, and elsewhere. But even these dismal episodes and circumstances could not keep black Americans from migrating north where the dream of self-determination seemed that much more within reach.

More than violence, 1919 was a year marked by triumph and optimism. On February 17, the 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” staged a magnificent parade to mark their return home from the war. More than one million people turned out to behold the heroic soldiers – the only American unit awarded the Croix de Guerre, which they earned after having spent 191 unbroken days in the trenches – on their march from Lower Manhattan up to Harlem. As the regiment turned on to Lenox Avenue, in the heart of Harlem, the band, led by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, began to play “Here Comes My Daddy Now” to an ecstatic crowd. The parade – with its music, spirit, and dignity – was more than a spectacle. It was an articulation of hope that gave way to a growing, infectious certainty that an equitable cultural victory could be won by the art and artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

Both the ambitions and the contradictions that characterized the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement are embodied in the terms themselves. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines a “renaissance” as a “rebirth” or “revival.” Some historians and critics believe that what took place during the Harlem Renaissance years was not a rebirth, as such, but only another stage in the evolution of African and African American art that had begun with the inception of African presence in America.

In addition, the cultural activity that has come to characterize the Harlem Renaissance was by no means limited to Harlem, whose geography, in spatial terms, consists of only two square miles at the northern tip of Manhattan. African American art, music, literature, and politics also thrived during the New Negro Movement in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Importantly, there was meaningful creative interplay between African American, Caribbean, and African writers during the Harlem Renaissance years. African American artists were concerned with what was being produced in other parts of the diaspora as much as they

were with the artistic flowering within their own borders. Most recently, a 2003 study by Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, makes evident the importance of the often neglected aspect of black internationalism that was actually embedded within the framework of the Harlem Renaissance itself. During the Harlem Renaissance years, Langston Hughes, for instance, spent more time away from Harlem than in it. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and in his correspondence to friends like Arna Bontemps, Carl Van Vechten, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, and others, Hughes kept a faithful catalogue of the numerous journeys he took within and without the borders of the United States during the years Harlem was in vogue.

Still, despite its inherent limitations, Harlem, New York was unique as a city that spoke to black hopes and dreams. "I was in love with Harlem long before I got there," Langston Hughes wrote in a retrospective essay, "My Early Days in Harlem," in 1963.¹ When Hughes writes of Harlem itself, he describes the singular romantic spell the neighborhood cast over him, and countless others.

Hughes was a teenager in Mexico with his father when he fell in love with Harlem. He was a single person involved in a collective romance with scores of black migrants who flocked to the neighborhood, which was first a Dutch settlement before it became German, then Irish, then Jewish, then black, and only after a real estate battle followed by white flight. Known as the "black Mecca," particular streets, like St. Nicholas Avenue, were known for the architectural splendor of the residences that distinguished them. Even on those blocks overwhelmed by poverty, the energy and sense of possibility, the sheer numbers of people dreaming the same dream, worked like a magnet. Laborers fresh from the South rubbed elbows with African Americans who had known wealth, independence, and social prestige for generations. Immigrants from the West Indies and Africa encountered black people with entirely different sensibilities and customs. Some of these subcultures blended harmoniously while others did so grudgingly, but all of this mixing provided excellent fodder for African American artists determined to translate the cultural upheaval they saw around them into their art. In 1928, Harlem alone claimed 200,000 black residents.

Black migrants mingled with African American natives of New York across culture and class lines, both outdoors – along the elegant avenues and broad sidewalks that characterized Harlem – and indoors – inside cabarets, buffet flats, speakeasies, and ballrooms that dominated nightlife in the city. The Harlem Renaissance flourished alongside the Jazz Age, an era that recalls the

institutions that made it famous, nightclubs like the Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, and Small's Paradise. The Cotton Club featured black performers like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith but catered only to a white clientele. Black patrons had to sit in segregated, "Jim Crow" sections in order to enjoy black entertainment. Black people were relegated to classless citizenship in venues devoted to the celebration of blackness. It was unavoidable: black art needed white patronage to survive. "Rent parties," thrown ostensibly to raise rent money for the host, became important avenues for African Americans to congregate privately, away from the curious gazes of white people. However successful these parties were at giving blacks in Harlem sanctuary from inquiring white eyes, they could not resolve the larger conundrum of white influence on the Harlem Renaissance.

Autobiographies written by those who were active during the New Negro era fondly recall parties, shows, and nightclub acts, but Harlem had a daytime personality as well, a sober counterpart to its giddy nighttime incarnation. Harlem was home to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Each of these institutions had a distinct personality embodied both by the individuals most closely associated with them and by the magazines and newspapers they produced. The NAACP had a leader nonpareil in the scholar, activist, and novelist W. E. B. Du Bois, who edited *The Crisis*, the house organ of the NAACP. The character of the National Urban League was intimately bound up with the vision of educator and writer Charles S. Johnson, who edited its magazine, *Opportunity*. The UNIA was founded and led by Marcus Garvey, who piloted the "Back to Africa Movement." He edited the organization's weekly newspaper, *Negro World*. Socialists Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, who led the labor organization known as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded the radical magazine *The Messenger*. Each of these organizations and magazines was dedicated to the achievement of social and political progress for black people. *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, and *Opportunity*, in particular, were critical because of their commitment to the identification and development of African American literature and art. For most African American writers, getting a book published may have been the ultimate goal, but newspapers and magazines reached the broadest audiences, and because of this they constituted significant vehicles for cultural expression during the Harlem Renaissance. Importantly, during the Harlem Renaissance years, New York had recently supplanted Boston as the center of American publishing. For literary hopefuls, the significance of New York was incomparable.

In literary terms, there was no event more central to the unveiling of the New Negro than the Civic Club dinner of 1924, which was sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine and organized by its editor Charles S. Johnson. At this event, 110 members of the New York literati, black and white, gathered to celebrate the burgeoning New Negro Movement. Johnson had originally imagined this event as a way to recognize Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, who had published her first novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924). Ultimately, the evening would be remembered, not as a paean to Fauset (much to her consternation), but as an incipient event in the history of the Harlem Renaissance, in that it provided an occasion for editors, writers, and publishers to share and confirm their common belief that a new era in African American art was on the horizon. At the time, the Civic Club was the only Manhattan social club that welcomed both black people and white women.

After the dinner, Paul Kellogg, editor of the sociological journal *Survey Graphic*, asked Charles S. Johnson to serve as editor of a volume that he would devote exclusively to African American culture. Johnson enlisted the philosopher and Howard University professor Alain Locke to help him assemble the issue. In March 1925, a special edition of *Survey Graphic*, entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," was released. It was the most widely read issue in the magazine's history, reaching more than twice its regular circulation. Months later, Alain Locke expanded this special edition into the anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), widely recognized as the first manifesto produced by the Harlem Renaissance. *The New Negro*, which featured portrait drawings as well as essays, poetry, and fiction, includes the work of many of the key figures of this movement.

Inspired by the success of his 1924 dinner, Charles S. Johnson decided that *Opportunity* would host a literary contest. An announcement appeared in the August 1924 issue of *Opportunity*; prizes would be awarded in May 1925. Johnson enticed readers with names of influential whites who would serve as judges. Ultimately, twenty-four esteemed white and black editors, publishers, and artists served as contest judges in five categories: essays, short stories, poetry, drama, and personal experiences.

The 316 people who attended the awards ceremony, held in May 1925, bore early witness to the redoubtable careers of a range of artists and writers: Sterling Brown in literature, Roland Hayes in music, E. Franklin Frazier in sociology, Zora Neale Hurston in folklore, the Guyanese writer Eric Walrond, and especially Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, who would always be rivals for the hearts of Harlem Renaissance poetry lovers. "The Weary Blues" (1925), a signature poem by Hughes, took the first prize in the *Opportunity*

contest. The wife of Henry Goddard Leach, editor of *Forum* magazine, contributed the \$470 in prize money. Casper Holstein, king of the Harlem numbers racket, would fund the second annual *Opportunity* contest. The contests and prize money made it official: the New Negro literary movement was underway.

What is a New Negro exactly? Alain Locke adopted the term “New Negro” from writers like A. Philip Randolph who, a few years before *The New Negro* was published, had used the term to describe a postwar generation undaunted by the possibility that militant action might serve a central role in black political and personal self-actualization. In “A New Crowd – A New Negro,” a 1919 article published in *The Messenger*, author A. Phillip Randolph, the founder of the magazine, details the distinction between Old and New Negroes. His critiques of the “Old Negro” included political conservatism, accommodationist politics, opposition to organized labor, and dependence upon white benefactors who had nothing but disdain for the working class. Randolph’s Old Negro is not just ideological; he had a face and a name. Old Negro attitudes and behaviors were represented in “conservatives” like diplomat, educator, author, and songwriter James Weldon Johnson, and essayist, novelist, and political leader W. E. B. Du Bois. According to Randolph, they stood in the way of racial progress. Why? Because of their involvement with the “Old Crowd of White Americans – a group which viciously opposes every demand made by organized labor for an opportunity to live a better life.”²

Clearly, Randolph’s problems were other people’s solutions. Johnson and Du Bois were widely revered as leaders of a new generation of black male leadership. The overlap here – the fact that Du Bois and Johnson could be Old and New Negro at once – points to one of the key contradictions within the movement, that the terms have no true and constant meaning. The New Negro Movement, as a phenomenon, was fueled by a revisionist imperative that *required* internal dissent and fragmentation; this imperative *was* the New Negro Movement itself. The compulsion to define New Negro against Old Negro was common both to Randolph and to those with whom he worked, as well as to Du Bois, Johnson, and their cohort. It was a compulsion that necessitated, and effectively created, its own antagonists. In other words, the Old Negro – a creature forever beholden to white expectations – and the New Negro – a being forever liberated from white expectations – needed each other to exist. They were so enmeshed as to be inextricable. The ideologies they represented were flip sides of the same coin.

What is an Old Negro? Again, Harlem Renaissance power broker Alain Locke provides a definition in “The New Negro,” the essay that introduces the

eponymous 1925 collection. He writes, "The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. He had been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism."³ Sambos, pickaninnies, bucks, mammies, Uncle Toms, were stock figures that dominated the cultural landscape of the American South in broadsides, advertisements, and minstrel shows. With the debut of *Birth of a Nation*, they permeated the new film industry as well.

Released in 1915, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* served as a strange kind of inspiration for black leaders of the New Negro Movement. The innovative Griffith made history with his Civil War epic, introducing techniques like the close-up and inventing the language of narrative cinema. The three-hour saga was almost six times longer than any film that had come before it, and audiences were riveted from beginning to end. Some viewers were glued to their seats by horror. *Birth of a Nation* was a paean to the Old South, a virtual advertisement for lynching and the Ku Klux Klan. It would gross over 3 million dollars. The NAACP, as well as *The Crisis*, found a purpose and kicked into action. In its vulgar, unabashed hostility toward blacks, *Birth of a Nation*, ironically, helped the NAACP consolidate its purpose.

The intensity of the protests against the 1915 film reflected the fears that W. E. B. Du Bois and others had about the potential impact of the film on black people, both materially and symbolically. He was right to worry. After watching the movie, a white patron in Lafayette, Indiana murdered a black boy. The film incited racist violence all over the country. Du Bois remembered in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940): the "number of mob murders so increased that nearly one hundred Negroes were lynched during 1915 and a score of whites, a larger number than had occurred for more than a decade."⁴ With its dehumanizing images of black savages and buffoons, *Birth of a Nation* demonstrated the power of the moving picture to name black people in a language more persuasive than anything the page or a photograph could ever manifest. In New York City alone, 3 million viewers went to see the film in the first eleven months. President Woodrow Wilson reportedly said the film was like "writing history with lightning," and sighed, "My only regret is that it is all so terribly true." *Birth of a Nation* ignited a battle over the portrayal of blacks in film that continues to this day.

Du Bois knew the power of pictures, moving and still. In general, scholars of the Harlem Renaissance have overlooked images in favor of words, a mistake that three recent works attempt to correct. *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* by Martha Jane Nadell, *Word, Image, and the*

New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance by Anne Elizabeth Carroll, and *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* by Amy Helene Kirschke all explain how illustrations and portraiture served as alternate tools used to convey stories of black progress and ambition. Nadell and Carroll discuss the ways in which the *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro* were both concerned with enlarging upon representations of the New Negro “through word and image.”⁵

Black identity was being almost literally reshaped as black bodies were posed in their most becoming light. The act of replacing negative images with positive ones was both simple and profound. It was a visual revolution, and Du Bois knew it. “Pictures of colored people were an innovation,” he explained in 1951. “At that time it was the rule of most white papers never to publish a picture of a colored person except as a criminal.”⁶ Du Bois shaped *The Crisis* deliberately to educate readers about the positive side of black life; the images were a subset of his grand project of black liberation.

Since the inception of African presence in the United States, black people have been engaged in a drama of “re-presentation,” an ongoing, endless struggle to redefine the image of the black in the white mind. Pictures are paramount, but the battle against stereotypes was being most passionately fought on the landscape of New Negro literature. For black people, the written word has always provided both script and setting for racial redefinition and representation.

In the preface to his 1922 volume *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson outlines the particular dilemma facing the New Negro writer:

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced ... And nothing will do more to change [the national mental attitude toward the Negro] and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.⁷

The Book of American Negro Poetry was the first black-authored anthology of black writing, and, as such, a cornerstone publication of the New Negro Movement. The edition itself is evidence of racial achievement and success, but the lines above are burdened with Sisyphean defeat. Published nearly 150 years after Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the first published book by an African American, Johnson’s preface underscores a theme that connects both generations of black writers, which is

that black authorship requires white readership. It is only through the acceptance of white readers alone that blacks will achieve self-actualization. When Johnson explains, “The public, generally speaking, does not know that there are American Negro poets,” the “public” to which he refers (and which he means to educate) is implicitly white. It is this audience whose sympathies the black writer of the 1920s had to solicit in order to have a public existence.

The New Negro Movement spawned lively debates about the relationship between race and art. W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson agreed that the black author lacked true freedom. Du Bois wrote frankly that black writers ought to use their art to advocate for black advancement. Black art must present black people in a manner that makes obvious their respectability according to bourgeois norms. He writes in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926):

We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons. We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people talk of it. Our religion holds us in superstition. Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side. In all sorts of ways we are hemmed in and our new young artists have got to fight their way to freedom.⁸

In “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois discusses African American creative forms as being inextricably tied to audiences with competing sets of needs and desires. The kind of black writing that titillates white readerships has the potential to alienate black readerships. Black writers are therefore in a veritable bind, with the line between commercial success and race betrayal looking very thin indeed. At the time of the Harlem Renaissance, black culture was understood to be in a period of great crisis and radical transformation. Central to this spirit of intense expectation was the hope that black people would be judged differently by white readers and spectators. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” what is considered to be most dangerous – and, implicitly, most in need of cultivation – is white reaction to Negro art. A frank concern with white reception is the constant that links the philosophies of both Du Bois and Johnson about the nature and meaning of black art.

The prominent Harlem Renaissance writers Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer quarreled with the term “black writer” itself. “What is Africa to me?” Cullen wonders in his 1925 poem “Heritage.” Toomer, whose haunting work of prose-poetry, *Cane* (1923), is often considered one of the masterpieces of the era, did not embrace a black identity. Indeed, what could Africa mean for African Americans with complex ancestries and bloodlines, like Toomer’s, who could certainly pass for white, or with roots in plush bourgeois homes,

like Cullen. For him, Africa was an abstraction, blackness a riddle. The upper-class, light-skinned characters that dominate the fiction of Jessie Fauset struggle unhappily with the complex nature of blackness in the modern world. For writers like Langston Hughes, the solution to the riddle of black American experience lay in a direct line to the Motherland. But for black Americans even today, the puzzle of Africa remains intact. Is the line between African and American unbroken, despite a centuries-long separation? Or are African Americans, in fact, possessed of another identity entirely, something still unknown and very much in process? The conundrum has no resolution; meaning lies in the mystery itself.

The satirist George Schuyler took issue with the concept of a common, homogeneous blackness, at least one that was separate from whiteness. In his 1931 novel *Black No More*, Schuyler describes, with his typical scathing wit, a society in which blacks suddenly have the ability to become white, a turn of events that leads to all of the whites scrambling to turn black. In his 1926 essay "The Negro Art-Hokum," Schuyler characterized any belief in an African American art form that is distinct from a white, or "mainstream," American art form as a foolish myth. "As for the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans – such as there is – it is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans," Schuyler insisted.⁹ As Martin Favor explains in *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, Schuyler's characterization of the African American as a "lampblack Anglo-Saxon" got him into some trouble with black readers and critics who have characterized him as "assimilationist, accommodationist, and counterproductive to the struggle for racial equality."¹⁰ But beneath Schuyler's provocations are some serious challenges to those that subscribe to the idea that African American culture and mainstream American culture are, and have always been, inextricably intertwined.

Schuyler was an anti-essentialist who believed that a common national identity united black and white Americans and superseded individual racial or ethnic allegiances. He also believed that all arguments to the contrary were concocted by "Negrophobists," the term he invented for people who subscribed to the myth, "recently rehashed by the sainted Harding, that there are 'fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences' between white and black Americans":

On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must needs be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. While such reasoning may seem

conclusive to the majority of Americans, it must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people.¹¹

Langston Hughes wrote his most famous essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), in response to Schuyler's provocative lines. He begins with a portrait of an anonymous black poet – Countee Cullen – who wants to be known as "a poet – not a Negro poet," a conclusion Schuyler might characterize as enlightened but that to Hughes is a sign of racial self-hatred. But even if the nameless poet in Hughes's essay does, in fact, express a coded desire to be "white," that is still not necessarily a rejection of his blackness. After all, the "young poet" is from a "fairly typical home of the colored middle class," Hughes tells his readers. The heart of blackness Hughes describes may just be alien to him; does a desire for whiteness necessarily follow? According to Hughes, to fail to hear the "eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul" is to be, essentially, white. But what if tom-toms fail to move you? Can you still be black? For Hughes, the answer is no, at least rhetorically speaking. Hughes uses the essay as a platform to announce that he, for one, was finished with looking over his shoulder and guessing at possible reactions of others to his work. He symbolically throws off the shackles of white *and* black spectatorship alike with the famous lines:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.¹²

In "Negro Artist," Hughes aligns himself not with the self-conscious intellectuals wringing their hands over the nature and purpose of black art, but with the "Negro farthest down," who are fond of "their nip of gin on Saturday nights," and in whom the tom toms beat like the flow of blood.¹³ He had a companion in his admiration for the group whom he describes as "the low-down folks, the so-called common element." His companion was the most famous white champion of black art, Carl Van Vechten.

In the March 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, Van Vechten champions "the squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life." Both Hughes and Van Vechten defended the black artist's right to paint the world and its citizens as he saw them, but Van Vechten's position contained a decidedly pragmatic element: "Are Negro

writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop remains?" Like Du Bois and Johnson, Van Vechten was preoccupied with white audiences; in decidedly anti-philosophical terms, however, Van Vechten urged black writers to utilize black materials for profit while whites were still interested.

Van Vechten outlines his position in his 1926 essay, "Moanin' Wid a Sword in Mah Han'," in a discussion about Negro spirituals:

It is a foregone conclusion that with the craving to hear these songs that is known to exist on the part of the public, it will not be long before white singers have taken them over and made them enough their own so that the public will be surfeited sooner or later with opportunities to enjoy them, and – when the Negro tardily offers to sing them in public – it will perhaps be too late to stir the interest which now lies latent in the breast of every music lover.¹⁴

In other words, African Americans should heed the call of the market – and fast. Van Vechten's argument is premised upon the inevitability of white fascination with the fiction of black primitivism. If the white gaze is here to stay, then black people should manipulate it in their own interests. We may bristle at Van Vechten's brutal cynicism and essentialist language, but the outcome he describes above is a veritable cliché in the annals of African American culture. White spectatorship – and appropriation – is, finally, a central facet of African American cultural history.

Du Bois was particularly concerned about the role that white influence played in the production of black art. He organized the 1926 symposium, "How Shall the Negro Be Portrayed in Art?" whose questions all touched on the issue either implicitly or explicitly:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?
2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation, and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as Porgy received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish, and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?
7. Is there not a danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro characters in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?¹⁵

In his introduction to the questionnaire, Du Bois discusses the convention of racist portrayals of blacks in literature by whites. He argues, “while the individual portrait may be true and artistic, the net result to American literature is to picture twelve million Americans as prostitutes, thieves and fools and that such ‘freedom’ in art is miserably unfair.”¹⁶ His remarks are aimed at white writers who capitalize on racist imagery, but the questions he has provided for the symposium reflect a concern for the effect that the popularization of this imagery would have on black writers. One of his anxieties is the way in which the art of black writers beholden to white philanthropy would be compromised. Du Bois solicited answers to these questions from a racially diverse group of literary figures from all corners of the American literary world. He published their answers in *The Crisis* over several months. One of the respondents was Carl Van Vechten, who had anonymously authored the questions.

Van Vechten (1880–1964), a novelist, cultural critic, and Negro arts enthusiast, had been a presence in the Harlem Renaissance since its inception. At the 1925 *Opportunity* awards dinner, Van Vechten made a point of introducing himself to the evening’s brightest star, Langston Hughes. Within three weeks of this meeting, Van Vechten had secured for Hughes a contract with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. for his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), and he had suggested the title, as well. Van Vechten would maintain an active role in Hughes’s life both as a friend and as a mentor. He would also champion the work of Nella Larsen, whom he would also guide to publication at Knopf, as well as Zora Neale Hurston, who deemed him a “Negrotarian.” In addition, Van Vechten rescued from obscurity the anonymously published *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and reissued it in 1927 as a novel by James Weldon Johnson, the well-known African American political and cultural figure, and his close friend. Van Vechten was committed to black writers, just as he was enamored of black performers like Ethel Waters, Roland Hayes, and Billie Holiday, whose careers he enthusiastically championed.

Van Vechten was not the only white person who championed the cause of black arts during the Harlem Renaissance. White patrons like Charlotte Mason and Amy Spingarn were equally powerful in their own very disparate ways in the world of New Negro letters. Mason served, for a time, as patron to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and exercised an unsettling degree of control over their creative and emotional lives. Hughes could always rely on the philanthropist Amy Spingarn, whose brother Joel and husband Arthur contributed to the project of black racial progress in their respective careers as lawyers. There were other prominent white figures in the New Negro Movement, but none outdistanced Carl Van Vechten in his commitment to and impact on black arts and letters.

In 1926, Van Vechten published *Nigger Heaven*, his most serious novel, and the only one he would write about African American life and culture. It looked like the realization of the fears harbored by Hughes, who himself admitted to having suspicions about the man who had become his friend. When the book appeared, Van Vechten was already a bestseller and a celebrity, a well-published journalist and author of four previously published novels. He had published numerous articles in popular, mainstream publications, like *Vanity Fair*, describing the spirituals and the blues as the only truly authentic American art forms. In his passion for black art and people, Van Vechten embodied the truest conundrum of the Harlem Renaissance: where do we draw the line between black art and white influence? It is a question that remains with us today.

Du Bois despised *Nigger Heaven*, and published a scathing review of it in *The Crisis*, advising readers to “drop the book gently into the grate.”¹⁷ Like Du Bois, many black readers felt betrayed by *Nigger Heaven*, and shared the sentiments of the *New York News* reviewer, who concluded: “Anyone who would call a book Nigger Heaven would call a Negro a Nigger.”¹⁸ Van Vechten would always claim the title was meant to be ironic. He explained that “nigger heaven” was a common term used in Harlem to refer to the balcony section in segregated theaters usually reserved for black patrons. He insisted that he had employed it as a metaphor to comment more generally upon the cruelties and absurdities of segregation and racism. But Van Vechten also believed that his status as an “honorary Negro” somehow absolved him of racism; or at least, it lent him an authority to use “nigger,” a term sometimes used privately between blacks but traditionally forbidden to whites. Finally, a combination of naiveté and arrogance led him to believe he was unique, a white man who had transcended his whiteness. Both loved and hated, *Nigger Heaven* went through nine printings

in its first four months, selling more copies than any other Harlem Renaissance novel.

The book had its black defenders, however. Among them was Langston Hughes. "No book could possibly be as bad as *Nigger Heaven* has been painted," Hughes wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1927; in his review, he sidestepped the question of whether the novel had literary merit.¹⁹ Even when he returned to the controversy nearly fifteen years later in *The Big Sea*, he never claimed that the book should be appreciated as an exceptional work of literature. Instead he sympathized with those who felt alienated by the racial epithet that was the title, but insisted that readers put the issue in perspective. "The critics of the left, like the Negroes of the right, proceeded to light on Mr. Van Vechten, and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on," Hughes recounted.²⁰

Of all his black associates, Van Vechten was most often accused of corrupting Langston Hughes, particularly when *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Hughes's second book of poetry, was published in 1927. "I do not know what facts Mr. Davis himself may possess as to how, where, or when I have been misdirected by Mr. Van Vechten, but since I happen to be the person who wrote the material comprising *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, I would like herewith to state and declare that many of the poems in said book were written before I made the acquaintance of Mr. Van Vechten," Hughes wrote to *The Crisis* in September 1928. He wrote in response to "Our Negro 'Intellectuals,'" an August article in which sociologist and critic Allison Davis lamented, "I think the severest charge one can make against Mr. Van Vechten is that he misdirected a genuine poet," meaning Hughes.²¹ Underneath the article runs a selection of photographs of valedictorians, salutatorians, MA students, and Phi Beta Kappas – *real* intellectuals who, presumably, give the lie to the pretensions of the artists Davis castigates, like Hughes. Hughes's September retort continues, "Those poems which were written after my acquaintance with Mr. Van Vechten were certainly not about him, not requested by him, not misdirected by him, some of them not liked by him nor, so far as I can tell, do they in any way bear his poetic influence."²² *Fine Clothes* drew as much fire for its title and sensual content as did *Nigger Heaven*.

Black writers who championed *Nigger Heaven* found the novel more meaningful as a symbol than as a literary achievement. Within months of its publication, black writers used the book to stake out creative territory. They defended the novel as a way of announcing their own intentions to break free of the kinds of ideological constraints they felt had been imposed upon them by those of a more conservative, older generation, whose

members advocated only “positive” representations of blackness in print. A 1926 journal *Fire!!* became the clearest articulation of the aesthetic goals of this younger generation, which included Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman. In *Fire!!*, conceived and edited by Wallace Thurman, these writers and their peers wrote about sex and Carl Van Vechten, among other topics, as a way of critiquing censorship and racial parochialism in literature. As much as the editors of *Fire!!* envisioned their magazine as one that would operate free of white support, such a goal proved unrealistic. An actual fire put an end to the journal, which lasted for only one issue.

Written two years after the *Crisis* symposium, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” (1928) by James Weldon Johnson points to the ugly underbelly of Van Vechten’s enthusiasm about the viability of “exotic material” in white mainstream culture. “White America has a strong feeling that Negro artists should refrain from making use of white subject matter,” Johnson writes. “In plain words, white America does not welcome seeing the Negro competing with the white man on what it considers the white man’s own ground.”²³ Johnson’s insight impels us to consider whether Van Vechten’s exhortation that black writers should “climb to fame with material which is the heritage of their race” is simply another way of saying that black artists should stay in their place.

Johnson rejects the idea that black experience was somehow diametrically opposed to white, or American, experience. Like George Schuyler, Johnson saw racial and cultural cross-breeding as an inherent feature of American life:

One sometimes hears the critics in reviewing a Negro musical show lament the fact that it is so much like white musical shows. But a great deal of this similarity it would be hard to avoid because of the plain fact that two out of the four chief ingredients in the present day white musical show, the music and the dancing, are directly derived from the Negro.²⁴

Johnson does not go as far as Schuyler, who insists that black culture is as white as white culture is black. Such a conclusion was also implicitly rejected in the essays by Du Bois, Van Vechten, and Hughes.

The Harlem Renaissance was a singularly exciting occasion for the liveliest debates about the relationship between race and art that we had heretofore witnessed in African American history. The various dilemmas of the Negro artist outlined in the essays by Du Bois, Johnson, Van Vechten, and Hughes continue to be instructive, particularly in their contradictions and unlikely alliances. For instance, Hughes’s suggestion that black writers embrace everything that has been stigmatized and deemed inappropriate by whites *and*

blacks is a kissing cousin to Van Vechten's argument that black artists ought to take advantage of the materials that fulfilled white fantasies about exotic blackness. Both of their positions finally advocate equally limiting – if opposite – artistic boundaries as those espoused in Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art." Even James Weldon Johnson's measured essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," which attempts to examine all sides of the issue, ends with the following impossible instruction for the black artist: "standing on his racial foundation, he must fashion something that rises above race, and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty."²⁵

By pitting the universal against the racial, Johnson employs dichotomies that he challenges elsewhere in "Dilemma." But even if it were possible, would it ever be desirable for the black writer to "rise above race," as Johnson lobbies above? What would be sacrificed in the race for universality? We push race to the margins at serious cost. To be a Negro is to be human, but to be a Negro is also to be a Negro, a living repository of the particularities and incongruities of black identity. If we understand universal ideas and concepts through the unique lens of our own experience, isn't it possible that our personal experiences can translate into universal lessons, as well?

Here is what Du Bois predicted:

Just as soon as true Art emerges; just as soon as the black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, "He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro; he was born here; he was trained here; he is not a Negro – what is a Negro anyhow? He is just human ..."²⁶

Who wins, who loses, and what do we make of any of the resolutions proposed by the ultimately very meaningful and complex dilemma that introduces "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"? Is one a poet or a Negro poet? Are these identities naturally mutually exclusive? Does the achievement of one come at the cost of the other? The enduring debate over whether race is an essential or contingent feature of a black writer's identity continues to consume readers and writers of literature by African Americans. It is an issue whose larger meaning extends well beyond the page, because the dilemma of the Negro author is the dilemma of the Negro himself. The dilemma persists in our own time. Just how big is the gulf between American and African American?

"We are a new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed."²⁷ These words are not from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" by Langston Hughes but

from Terry McMillan's introductory essay to her 1990 collection *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*. McMillan's victorious language recalls "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves," Hughes announced in his 1926 manifesto. In 1989, the novelist and essayist Trey Ellis made a similar pronouncement in his much-reprinted essay, "The New Black Aesthetic."²⁸

The invocations of newness, of freedom, harken back to our discussion of the New Negro, an entity crafted to turn a new generation of African Americans (and whites) away from the old constraints represented in the Old Negro. Just what is it, in these modern times, that black writers want to redefine and turn our gaze away from?

Perhaps it was the very contingent, heavily qualified nature of the new freedom they describe. Is the problem "the unbearable whiteness of publishing"? A two-part 1995 *Village Voice* article by that name reveals that, despite the success and visibility of writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Amy Tan, to name a few, "the industry remains almost completely white." Author James Ledbetter quotes Walter Mosley who wrote, "American publishing, the very bastion of liberalism, the benefactor of the First Amendment, has kept any hint of color from its halls."²⁹ *Erasure*, a 2002 novel by Percival Everett, satirizes the industry's myopic attitudes about the relationship between race and writing. His novel puts flesh to the argument made by John K. Young in his 2006 study, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African-American Literature*, in which he contends: "The predominantly white publishing industry reflects and often reinforces the racial divide that has always defined American society, representing 'blackness' as a one-dimensional cultural experience."³⁰ African American writers may be free to "write as we please," but as James Weldon Johnson explained in 1928, white power, influence, and expectation, so intimately connected to black identity itself, cannot easily and simply be shrugged off.

"Black Renaissance: African American artists are truly free at last," reads the caption of the October 10, 1994 cover of *Time* magazine, whose cover photograph features dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones. The continuous hunger for a new era in black art is inextricably tied to a relentless desire to put the past to rest. It is a complex and contradictory hunger, as we have seen, but it consistently reveals how the story of blackness is one that is still evolving. The multiple and fascinating ways in which that story incorporates its attendant dilemmas are as compelling as the story itself.

Notes

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3. Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 5.
4. Davis Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), p. 507.
5. Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 36.
6. Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 232.
7. James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), p. 9.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* [1926], 290–297.
9. George Schuyler, "The Negro Art-Hokum," *The Nation* 122 (June 16, 1926): 662–663; 662.
10. Martin FAVOR, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 121.
11. Schuyler, "The Negro Art-Hokum," p. 312.
12. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), 692–694; repr. 694. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 1267–1271; p. 1271.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 1268.
14. Carl Van Vechten, "Moanin' Wid a Sword in Mah Han'," *Vanity Fair* 1926, repr. in Bruce Kellner (ed.), *"Keep A-Inchin' Along": Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten about Black Art and Letters* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 54–58; p. 55.
15. "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed: A Symposium," *The Crisis* 31.5 (March 1926): 219–220; 219.
16. "Opinion," *The Crisis* 31.4 (February 1926): 163–166; 165.
17. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Books," *The Crisis* 33 (December 1926): 81–2; 81.
18. Carl Van Vechten to James Weldon Johnson, James Weldon Johnson Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University, September 7, 1926.
19. Langston Hughes, "Those Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics," *Pittsburgh Courier* April 16, 1927; repr. in Christopher C. De Santis (ed.), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. ix: *Essays on Race, Politics, and World Affairs* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 38.
20. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 271.

21. Allison Davis, "Our Negro 'Intellectuals,'" *The Crisis* 35 (August 1928): 268–269; 269.
22. Langston Hughes, "To the Editor of *The Crisis*" (July 28, 1928), James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at Beinecke Library, Yale University.
23. James Weldon Johnson, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," *The American Mercury* 15.60 (December 1928): 477–481; 479.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 481.
26. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," p. 1002.
27. Terry McMillan, *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. xx.
28. *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989): 233–243.
29. James Ledbetter, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Publishing," *The Village Voice* 40 (July, August 1995): 29
30. John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 4.

African American literature and the Great Depression

DARRYL DICKSON-CARR

The 1930s in African American literary history comprised jarringly significant shifts in the style, subject matter, and direction of prose fiction. If the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s were to be reduced to a simple, even simplistic binary, it represented a struggle between younger artists generally desiring artistic freedom, or the opportunity to create art for its own sake, and older artists and intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Benjamin Brawley (1882–1939), Charles S. Johnson, and others who wished for the younger generation before them to see their art as part of an agenda of social and “racial” progress. This latter group could be as ambivalent as Du Bois in regarding these goals, voicing support on the one hand for works that “please,” “entertain,” and that are “good and human [stories],”¹ while decrying works and authors who do not recognize that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.”² Du Bois’s second view, it must be stressed, was an argument that art’s beauty stems from its ability to tell the truth, and that telling the truth meant conveying experiences that the reader would recognize as the truth, or otherwise widen the expanse of what she considered truthful and real. For African American authors, Du Bois argues, telling the truth means creating art that helps in “gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy” all the riches that surround them.³

In 1926, however, Du Bois’s arguments had less purchase with the younger generation than they would have a few years later, as the economic devastation of the Great Depression hit all Americans with horrific force, but doled out particularly bitter misery to African Americans, who suffered unemployment rates as high as 75 percent – three times the national rate – in many communities by the nadir of 1932–33. Langston Hughes recounts in *The Big Sea* that he “always felt slightly bad, too, when I was riding in the long town-car that belonged to my Park Avenue patron [wealthy dowager Charlotte Osgood Mason] – and most other Negroes (and white folk) were walking” as the

Depression worsened.⁴ Hughes's account, however, is also the source of one of the prevailing myths about the New Negro Renaissance: that the movement "reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the hill toward the Works Progress Administration."⁵ In his memoir's postscript, Hughes also writes that the spring of 1931 was for him and "all" of his peers "the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes ... Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money ... The generous 1920's [*sic*] were over."⁶

As several scholars have argued, though, little objective evidence supports the view that the New Negro Renaissance was over, if judged by the number of publications and opportunities for writers in the years between 1929 and the Works Progress Administration's founding in April 1935. Cary Wintz points out that while the movement "gradually dissipated in the early 1930s ... it is difficult to pinpoint the moment of its death. For the individual writer the end of the Renaissance was a personal event occurring when he or she consciously disassociated from the movement."⁷ Wintz also compiles a table showing when the major works of the movement were published. During the most celebrated years – 1924–29 – twenty-eight such books were published; between 1930 and 1935 – the last year for which Wintz compiled data – seventeen new works and a revised edition of James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* saw print.⁸ While this is certainly a decrease, it is only in "major works," in Wintz's estimation, and does not include all books published. The table, by definition, does not take into account "little magazines," such as *Fire!!* (1926) and *Harlem* (1928), although it includes Charles S. Johnson's anthology *Ebony and Topaz* (1927), which was published in the magazine format.

George Hutchinson asserts as well that "the New Negro Renaissance did not end in 1929," although "most of the creative writers of the 1920s and 1930s felt there was a distinct shift roughly coinciding with the turn of the decade, a shift announced by new satirical treatments of the New Negro by such authors as Wallace Thurman, George Schuyler, and Langston Hughes – authors who properly belong to both decades."⁹ Moreover, Hutchinson notes that publication opportunities for *all* American authors became more difficult in the 1930s, as smaller firms found the costs of publication too high.¹⁰ Hutchinson wryly suggests that "because the blossoming of the 1920s had seemed so miraculous, and perhaps because the number of *parties* declined," such writers as Hughes and Sterling Brown perceived the relative dearth of opportunities

as the end of an era and, in Hughes's case, saw this as evidence of white-owned publishing houses' loss of interest in the "Negro vogue."¹¹

Nevertheless, Hughes and Brown had a significant basis for their perception, as many magazines and publishers *did* curtail their pursuit of black voices, at least those that did not follow a particular set of narratives that publishers believed would sell. Hughes argues, for example, that "[t]hose novels about Negroes that sell best, by Negroes or whites, those novels that make the best-seller lists and receive the leading prizes, are almost always books that touch very lightly upon the facts of Negro life, books that make our black ghettos in the big cities seem very happy places indeed, and our plantations in the deep South idyllic in their pastoral loveliness."¹² Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Mayberry Johnson contend, both in support of and in contradistinction to Hughes's point, that white-owned magazines "did not appreciably alter the policies they had pursued in the 1920s" with regard to African American writers; editors "accepted occasional pieces from established black writers," such as Hughes, Countee Cullen, George S. Schuyler, and Claude McKay and scarcely noticed newer writers.¹³ Of white-owned periodicals, only the newer leftist magazines, such as *Partisan Review*, *New Masses*, *Midland Left*, *Anvil*, and *Left Front* made conscious efforts to seek out and publish new black writers. The same African American-owned magazines that had incorporated short stories and poetry by black authors, such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, still sought their material, but less often, and with less enthusiasm toward encouraging groundbreaking work.¹⁴ Sterling Brown's 1930 essay "Our Literary Audience," published in *Opportunity*, castigates black readers who perceive black books as "sociological documents," who are "afraid of truth telling, of satire" and too "bourgeois," or who "insist that Negro books must be idealistic, optimistic tracts for race advertisement."¹⁵

Brown's and Hughes's comments indicate that both publishers' and readers' interest in African American writing transformed in the 1930s, as did the writers themselves, and not always for the better. The 1920s afforded opportunities for African American writers to publish poetry, short stories, and novels that portrayed African Americans of all classes in a broad array of perspectives, from the struggling poor black woman or man to the black cultural and economic elite. The 1930s saw this range narrow somewhat in favor of a greater emphasis on realism, with more cynical or, as Hutchinson argues, more satirical perspectives prevailing, despite Brown's concerns. In addition, publication for black authors was not restricted to major magazines, *petit magazines*, or novels. Journalist and novelist George S. Schuyler, who had gained a certain degree of fame in the 1920s as the author and occasional

co-author of "Shafts and Darts," a satirical column in *The Messenger* magazine (1917–28), where he was managing editor from 1924 to 1928, continued to serve as an editor and frequent contributor to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the second-largest black newspaper in the United States, after the *Chicago Defender*. From 1933 to 1939, Schuyler published numerous short stories and at least two serialized novels under such pseudonyms as "Rachel Call" and "Samuel I. Brooks," in addition to innumerable unsigned editorials, reviews, columns, and features. Ferguson reveals as well that from Schuyler's joining the *Courier* in 1924 to his dismissal in 1965, he was a "one-man editorial policy for black America's most popular newspaper for forty years."¹⁶

As the Depression strangled the nation, the politics of at least some writers shifted demonstrably to the left, with the various publications and organizations founded or dominated by members of the Communist Party USA influencing the content and direction of African American art. Others, such as Schuyler and Claude McKay, began slow, inexorable marches to the right that either reflected and reinforced convictions long held (Schuyler), or came about owing to complex personal choices (such as McKay's conversion to Catholicism). Coincident with this development, though, new and tried African American authors began to look at their present and recent past as sites of irony and occasionally caustic satire. Between 1930 and 1940, authors prominent during the salad days of the New Negro Renaissance – Schuyler (*Black No More* [1931]), Countee Cullen (*One Way to Heaven* [1932]), Zora Neale Hurston (*Moses, Man of the Mountain* [1939]), Langston Hughes (*The Ways of White Folks* [short stories; 1934]), Wallace Thurman (*Infants of the Spring* [1932]), and Richard Bruce Nugent (*Gentleman Jigger* [c.1928–33; published 2008]) – wrote or published stories and novels that considered African American lives from an explicitly ironic or satirical perspective. Their most common subjects were, in no particular order, the state of African American leadership; the successes and failures of the New Negro Movement; black intraracial discrimination along color and class lines; white racism; black nationalism; white patronage and its effect upon black cultural movements and ideas.

Despite their publication dates in the 1930s, very little material within these works explicitly considers the impact of the Depression on African Americans. The reasons are diverse, but a significant, albeit simple one is that many were composed early in the decade or late in the 1920s, and thus had no opportunity to reflect upon the worsening of black fortunes, even if an individual author, such as Langston Hughes, would have been more disposed to do so. As one example, Zora Neale Hurston's publications in the 1930s were largely the product of work she had undertaken in the late 1920s at the behest of her

patron, the wealthy dowager Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason. Mason hired Hurston to conduct research into black folk cultures for the sake of her own interest in theories regarding primitivism, or the notion that non-white peoples were closer to humanity's truer, primitive levels, and therefore relatively unsullied by the corruptions of civilization. Mason required Hurston to sign a contract that forbade publication of any products of their collaboration unless and until Mason gave her tacit approval. As a result, ideas and narratives that Hurston later developed into the novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and the classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the folklore collection *Mules and Men* (1935), and the anthropological study of voodoo *Tell My Horse* (1938) would not be published until years after their association was terminated, when the African American literary scene had adopted new tones and foci. While this would not and certainly did not alter Hurston's determination to write and publish what interested her from her unique perspective, it harmed her literary career as such erstwhile supporters as Alain Locke and such new voices as Richard Wright disparaged her work in their contemporary reviews. For nearly four decades, subsequent assessments were equally ungenerous. Only in the 1970s did Hurston begin to receive serious scholarly attention.

With the noted exceptions of Langston Hughes, poets Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown, and Jamaican-born poet, novelist, and memoirist Claude McKay, a similar misfortune befell the majority of writers who began their careers in the 1920s. As discussed above, this is not to say that they failed to find publishers – nearly all did, repeatedly – or that they did not continue to write. Rather, it is that their careers either took very different turns, consisting more of journalistic writing or efforts on behalf of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) within the Works Progress Administration (later Work Projects Administration, or WPA), in the cases of McKay and Hurston, as well as such immediate and later peers as Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, and Frank Yerby. Sadly, some died young or relatively young, among them Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, and Countee Cullen.

The FWP offered an ambivalent opportunity for those black writers who worked under its federal-level auspices from its founding in July 1935 through the end of the 1930s. (Aspects of the program continued under some states' sponsorship until 1943.) On the one hand, the program was a chance to highlight the folk through such works as the *American Guides* series detailing the forty-eight states, as well as smaller, more local projects. The lives of African Americans in the South, in particular, could in theory be infused with greater richness and humanity than had ever been seen on a national scale.

The WPA in general sponsored numerous arts projects in major cities that allowed artistic expression to flourish, rather than decay under the worst economic crisis in US history to date. In addition, the FWP gave rise to professional and political affiliations that would last for years, even decades beyond the Depression. Chicago's South Side Writers' Group, which Richard Wright founded in 1936, included such prominent members as Arna Bontemps and Margaret Walker, *inter alia*, and, with significant influence from the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and the University of Chicago's New School of Sociology, established criteria that would define social realism in literature among African American writers. On the other hand, the fact that FWP writers, black and white, had affiliations with radical groups, most conspicuously the CPUSA, made work within the project tense, as did standard racial tensions. The relative lack of independence that came with working for the federal government amounted to a much more benign form of patronage than Hughes and Hurston experienced under Charlotte Osgood Mason, but it was government patronage nonetheless, which meant oversight that could be undesirable. The FWP found itself subject to heightened public scrutiny by its critics, especially the Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC), whose investigations began in the late 1930s and continued well after the Second World War.

Although she benefited greatly from the FWP and outlived most of her New Negro peers, Zora Neale Hurston passed away in comparative obscurity. By the time of her death at the age of 69 in 1960, Hurston was living in poverty in south Florida; not long after her funeral, a sheriff's deputy who happened to know Hurston and her history rescued some of her surviving manuscripts from being incinerated. By the 1940s, and until his death in 1948 at the age of 58, Claude McKay had largely abandoned his earlier political and literary interests. He converted to Catholicism four years after publicly rejecting the ardent support of Marxism and Communism that had marked his career from the 1910s until 1940, when he published *Harlem: Great Negro Metropolis*, which roundly condemned Communists in its portrait of black Harlem. McKay was far from the only or the first person of African descent in the United States to embrace Marxism. His early devotion, however, led him to the Soviet Union in 1923, during its earliest, most exciting years, to address the Comintern on the so-called "Negro question." This momentous event followed years of work in the United States for Max Eastman's leftist journal, *Liberator*, and was followed in turn by years of travel in Europe, writing and working on behalf of radical causes.

McKay's experiences embodied both the cosmopolitanism that marked the modernism of the Jazz Age and the New Negro Renaissance, and the

radicalism that enraptured many African American writers in the 1930s. Again, black radicalism in the United States was hardly new. Besides McKay, such radicals as Hubert Harrison, Cyril V. Briggs, W. A. Domingo, Otto Huiswood, and many others played key roles in Harlem's dynamic political scene in the 1910s and 1920s, as did *The Messenger* magazine edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. *The Messenger* and its editors were responsible for gathering under their roof and publishing many of these individuals at one point or another in the early days of the Renaissance. Eventually *The Messenger* would cool some of its fiery rhetoric and become more mainstream in its approach, especially as it became the organ of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which Randolph had helped organize in August 1925. Notably, most of the prominent radicals working in Harlem at this time were from various Caribbean nations. A few, including Briggs, Domingo, McKay, and Huiswood, had worked for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) until they became disillusioned with the leader's execution of his visions. In 1919, they formed the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), which considered itself alternately Communist, socialist, and black nationalist, as a radical alternative to Garvey's black nationalism. When such prominent black leaders as Robert Bagnall, Chandler Owen, and William Pickens, *inter alia*, sought Garvey's downfall in the "Garvey Must Go!" campaign of 1921–23, the ABB also sought to counter the implicit and explicit anti-West Indian sentiment that informed the movement through a broad sense of common cause for people of the African Diaspora.

The tenor, makeup, and influence of black radicalism in the early 1920s, however, contrasts sharply with its incarnation during the Depression. Amid the sense of postwar prosperity that pervaded the nation and the middle-class aspirations of most African Americans, radicalism held relatively little sway beyond the street corners and meeting halls. African American and white radicals read *Liberator* and *The Messenger*, as did many among the masses, but this did not always translate into widespread support for radicalism, especially since white labor unions supported by the Socialist Party and other groups barred African Americans from their membership rolls. It would take the decimation of the American economy to give new life to black radicalism and, in turn, to African American literature.

One of the New Negro Renaissance's most significant foci gave rise to a crucial development in African American literature: folk life of the African Diaspora, especially as found, nurtured, and developed among and by native-born African Americans. Within black cultural circles – that is, the black intelligentsia and their supporters, white and black – a major controversy

erupted over Langston Hughes's choice to incorporate the rhythms and cadences of blues and jazz music, both of which shared roots within secular forms that emerged from the black rural South and the energies of such dynamic cities as New Orleans, and migrated to points north, west, and overseas. More pointedly, blues and jazz represented the "low-down," sexually transgressive elements of African American communities and cultures. Members of the black middle class considered these elements as too representative of the facets of black life that the white majority had reduced to demeaning stereotypes. They should not be valorized, many believed, especially since they were merely regionally based "fads" that would not survive.

Hughes had addressed this controversy directly in his landmark essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), then a manifesto for the younger generation of artists. Hughes's defiant, oft-quoted coda establishes a space for black artists to create what they please, for the purposes that suit them. If these artists intended to "express [their] individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame," then those expressions should include the folk.¹⁷ The black artist who "can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him [will find] a great field of unused material for his art" amongst the "low-down folks, the so-called common element." These folk "furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their individuality in the face of American standardizations." The artist has the option to draw upon the folk or address racial conflicts directly, but both his individuality and the folk offer him the additional choice to use the "incongruous humor" and "ironic laughter" that have marked African American cultural expressions.¹⁸ This desire to balance the folk with racial protest marked Hughes's early writings and would distinguish his aesthetic for many years to come.

Along with his close friend Zora Neale Hurston, who hailed from the small, all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, Hughes facilitated a sympathetic view of black folk life that made the careers of the next wave of great African American writers possible. If the depictions of folk culture and the rural South that Richard Wright, William Attaway, and Sterling Brown published in the 1930s differed dramatically from those of their predecessors, Hurston and Hughes nevertheless made it easier for these writers to depict what they heard and saw in the South and on the Plains, from the richness of black English to the institutional and cultural traditions that circumscribed their subjects. The words of black folk in their stories and poems *sound* to the mind's ear more realistic and authentic, by far, than those who spoke in the

dialect that pervaded literary representations of African Americans until that time.

Langston Hughes's classic first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), a semi-autobiographical tale set in rural Kansas, fused Hurston's and Hughes's sense of the folk with the nationalism brewing in black literary circles. Its genesis represents one of the more intriguing and tragic turns in Harlem's literary circles. Although Hughes had first drafted the novel two years earlier, in 1930 Hughes and Hurston had a major falling out over the writing of *Mule Bone*, a folk comedy upon which they had collaborated. Hurston copyrighted the play and subsequently commissioned a production of it in Cleveland, Ohio without Hughes's permission, facts Hughes discovered when he visited the city. These actions led to a resoundingly bitter dispute over authorship and ownership of the material that would ultimately lead to a complete dissolution of their friendship. Hurston argued that Hughes had contributed little to the play's conception and dialogue, that the folk elements undergirding the plot and characters were almost entirely hers; Hughes argued in turn that he had originated the basic situations, the plot, and a portion of the dialogue.

Whatever the truth underlying the controversy, Hurston's and Hughes's shared desire to dramatize and consequently valorize black folk life may be found throughout *Not Without Laughter*, which contains stock characters – all based directly upon people from Hughes's own childhood – who alternately resemble commonly held stereotypes in American fiction about black folks and turn these portrayals on their heads. Their interactions allow Hughes to take a cue from James Weldon Johnson's influential *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and present contemporary views of black-white relations, intragroup issues, and black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois. The novel's title refers to the importance of humor and laughter, in all their forms, to African Americans confronted with the limitations of Jim Crow. As Hurston stresses in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), and as Richard Wright would nine years later in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), humor and laughter serve less as salves than as punctuation marks upon the strains and stresses that racist discrimination engenders. Laughter allows irony to enter the examination of black lives in which, as Hurston writes, African Americans "shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame" for nearly anything they do.¹⁹ *Not Without Laughter* opens with Aunt Hager Williams decrying the storm coming over the Stanton, Kansas horizon, a portent of difficult times to come for her community and family. Her grandson James, better known as Sandy, is Hughes's analog within the novel. Hughes consciously gives the narrative a plot

drenched in the blues, as young Sandy struggles with his complex relationships with his mother Annjee, his blues guitarist father Jimboy, and his aunts, to say nothing of matriarch Aunt Hager and an ever-pervasive institutionalized racism within the town. In this regard, the novel fuses Hughes's own difficult upbringing in Lawrence, Kansas with the complex personal, familial, and community histories that constitute the blues tradition. *Not Without Laughter* originated largely in Charlotte Osgood Mason's explicit charge that Hughes should write a novel that captured the primitive lives of African Americans that Hughes had studied on a jaunt through the South in 1926.²⁰ The novel's rural setting emphasizes the power of nature within and over the characters' lives, as they are alternately torn apart or unified over both meteorological (tornadoes, rain, sleet, floods) and emotional or physical traumas (Jimboy's wandering; Sandy's maturity and sexual awakening; the family's crippling poverty; Annjee's illness). The crucial saving grace in all of these tragedies is the power of the "ironic laughter" that Hughes mentioned in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the same laughter that has kept African Americans from falling into complete despair and destruction since the beginning of the slave trade. Sandy learns, for example, how to play the dozens, the folk game of put-downs and wordplay that simultaneously develops the player's wit and helps group cohesion.²¹ As in other powerful rituals that bind African American life, however, the dozens implicitly acknowledges that pain and anger lie beneath the guffaws it generates. Sandy, for his part, discovers that survival in these difficult circumstances is not enough; he eventually migrates to Chicago, as Hughes's protégé Wright had, and where Hughes had visited and would eventually find a temporary home. In this regard, *Not Without Laughter* also stands as one of the most prominent novels depicting the Great Migration, albeit from a slightly different perspective than those originating in the Deep South.

From the late 1920s to the early 1930s, black artists began to produce more nuanced depictions of African Americans' intragroup dynamics and experiences, as well as their encounters with the greater American society than the modernist impressionism of the previous decade. By the mid-1930s and the nadir of the Great Depression, African American authors had largely made the transition to a more conscious realism. The social realism that had found its voice in such earlier American voices as Upton Sinclair, Henry James, and Theodore Dreiser fused with the arguments and experiments of sociology to place the African American individual in a stark environment filled with dirt, ashes, and gray skies, purged of much of the color, joy, and periodic abandon that balanced fiction and poetry of the New Negro Movement. The reasons

for this shift are rooted in discussions about literature that began in earnest in the mid-1920s. George Hutchinson reveals that c.1924–25, such publications as *The New Masses* “generally attacked high modernism and the worship of esoteric formal experimentation, calling instead for an art of social engagement” that would represent and address the concerns of the proletariat, rather than the middle class.²² Such writers as James Rorty, for example, would criticize Langston Hughes’s landmark *The Weary Blues* (1926) for its dearth of bitterness and for its relative timidity in broaching condemnations of racism. Hughes himself slowly began to radicalize his poetry and to satirize the “exotic primitivism” that Charlotte Osgood Mason championed.²³

Beyond intellectual circles, though, writers’ shifts in outlook had strong links to the nation’s migration patterns. The 1930s continued and comprised another epochal moment in the twentieth century: the Great Migration. Starting in the 1910s, millions of black Southerners left the nation’s rural, agricultural Black Belt in favor of the industrial North in search of higher wages and greater economic and social opportunities overall. This had been documented at great length, and Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925) concerned itself as much with migration as it did with documenting the complexities of African American culture. In the 1930s, though, migration became a more desperate matter, as the deep poverty and severely limited vocational opportunities for blacks teetered on the brink of cataclysm. The differences that 1930s authors drew between the agrarian South and the modern, mechanical North may be found in an early passage of William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* (1941), as the “red-clay” Kentuckian principal characters adjust to the steel mills of West Virginia:

*Yes, them red-clay hills was what we call stripped ground, but there was growing things everywhere and crab-apple trees bunched – stunted but beautiful in the sun ... To us ... who are seeing the red-clay hills with our minds this Allegheny county is an ugly, smoking hell out of a backwoods preacher’s sermon ... We can’t see where nothin’ grows around here but rusty iron towers and brick stacks, walled up like somebody’s liable to steal them. Where are the trees? They so far away on the tops of the low mountains that they look like the fringe on a black wear-me-to-a-wake dress held upside down against the sky.*²⁴

In this passage are found the tropes of black social realism, with natural reds and greens placed in counterpoint to the artificial red of rust and brick, as well as the black of the mountains, stripped of their life by industrial machines and economic exploitation. The black agrarian setting or folk life serves not merely as the site of nostalgia, but also as an ironic paradise lost. If the

South's Jim Crow realities – segregation, peonage, lynchings, disfranchisement – were nearly intolerable to the African American striving for her potential, the North represented cold, mechanical indifference, which alternated with related, but different hostilities from Caucasians of various ethnicities, as well as people of color from competing groups.

Attaway's tropes – the inescapable terror of life in modern, industrialized America, ethnic strife, intraracial conflicts, and racism's complexities – illustrate almost perfectly the prevailing stylistic and political concerns of African American literature in the Depression and beyond. The Depression's throttling of the American economy coincided with African American culture shifting its center from Harlem to Chicago, whose status as the great metropolis of the Midwest and massive industrial base made it ripe both for radical organizing and for literary aspirants. In many respects, the Chicago phase of the Negro Renaissance represents the period in which African American literature came into its own, finding a voice in social realism.

Social realism's best-known champion and exemplar, by far, was Mississippi native Richard Wright. Wright's stories and novels combined a number of elements, including the searing iconoclasm of his hero, journalist and critic H. L. (Henry Louis) Mencken; the blues aesthetic of his protégé and friend Langston Hughes; the sociology of the "Chicago School"; his deep interest in Marxist principles as a member of the CPUSA; the naturalism of Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair; and a passion for exposing the degrees to which racism found its way into African Americans' lives in the most horrifying and insidious ways. While *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) made Wright a significant literary voice, the runaway success of *Native Son* (1940) cast him into the highest ranks of contemporary writers. The novel contained all of the elements found within Wright's early work and manifested the principles elucidated in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," which argues for African American authors to produce realistic depictions of the black masses' social and economic situations, rather than the "curtsying" that Wright cast as "the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice" before and during the New Negro Renaissance.²⁵ Instead, Wright insisted, when African American authors wrote about African Americans, they should strive for a certain degree of black nationalism, to see blacks as a nation within a nation that had particular grievances.

In effect, Wright drew upon and strongly amplified several prominent ideas and arguments that had emerged in the 1920s. His view of black nationalism in general stemmed from the Communist International's Black Belt Nation thesis of 1928, which "projected an African-American southern nation, subject

to special oppression but boasting a distinct, oppositional culture,” via the input of black radicals who traveled to Moscow to shape discussion of the “Negro question.”²⁶ In addition, Wright’s application of this thesis to the literary arts in “Blueprint” uncannily echoes the arguments of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, each of whom perceived African Americans as constituting a class within the larger American polity that would not achieve its goals without both common purposes and dedication to depicting those purposes truthfully in art.²⁷ Although it is not clear whether Wright encountered Du Bois and Locke directly, both scholars influenced black intellectual thought in the 1920s well beyond New Negro circles. As Cedric Robinson and William Maxwell have argued, Du Bois in particular played a significant role in developing radical thought in the 1920s and 1930s, even if he eschewed Communism at that time.²⁸ For Wright, nationalism in African American cultural life was a given, a product of segregation that should be put to use, rather than ignored or dismissed out of hand. The products of these efforts, in turn, would be a truer view of black life, one facilitating the ascendance of the masses in a rapidly changing American scene.

Wright’s ideas were not entirely his own; not only was he influenced, albeit indirectly, by intellectual positions voiced a decade earlier, but *New Masses*, the venue in which he published “Blueprint for Negro Writing” was in fact an organ that his friend, novelist Dorothy West, had co-edited with Marian Minus (1913–72). The editors and Wright had discussed these arguments repeatedly in the South Side Writers’ Group and other organizations. The writers who participated in these discussions formed the nucleus of the Chicago Renaissance – sometimes called the Second Chicago Renaissance to distinguish it from the earlier one that had flourished among white writers in the 1900s and 1910s – and produced the core texts that would reflect a shared artistic vision heavily determined by Wright’s views. These authors included West, Minus, Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Willard Motley, Theodore Ward, Katherine Dunham (1909–2006), and Etta Moten (1901–2004), and Alden and Edward Bland, each of whom played a role in altering African American literature by publishing as broadly as possible in the limited venues available to black writers.

The sensibilities of this group often conflicted with those of the Harlem group a decade earlier, and with each other. The assessments of Zora Neale Hurston’s first books are cases in point. In the same issue of *New Challenge* in which “Blueprint for Negro Writing” appeared, Marian Minus offered a positive review of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, while Richard Wright effectively panned the novel. Although he allowed that Hurston “can

write,” Wright condemned the novel for presenting the sort of black characters that “makes the ‘white folks’ laugh,” but in a narrative that “carries no theme, no message, no thought.”²⁹ To be fair, Hurston’s contemporary and former friend and mentor Alain Locke made a similar observation in his review, arguing that Hurston’s portrayal of black folk life and lore carried little gravitas.³⁰ For her part, Hurston subsequently condemned Wright’s and Locke’s push for a Marxist oriented view of African Americans, which jibed with the position she outlined in the 1928 essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” She asserts with pride that she is not of the “sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.”³¹ Hurston makes clear in the rest of her essay and many other writings that her experiences with racism, however real they may be, do not negate the resilience that she and other African Americans developed under Jim Crow. Her upbringing in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida certainly colored her views, as did Richard Wright’s experiences in deeply segregated Jackson, Mississippi. Through their essays, stories, and novels, both saw the South as emblematic of black potential, although Wright saw that potential as a powder-keg that could easily explode, and would if it were not for the limits of Jim Crow.

Hurston’s books reveal a potential manifested in the folk. As her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) stands as Hurston’s first extended opportunity to demonstrate the bonds created by African American communities’ shared culture and history; it is also one of Hurston’s most autobiographical works. Set in Florida not long after the Civil War, the novel centers upon John “Buddy” Pearson, a “high-yellow” preacher whose character is tempered in childhood through the conflicting perspectives of his formerly enslaved parents. John Buddy’s mother, Amy Crittenden, wishes to protect him from adversity, while his stepfather, Ned, places him under a tough apprenticeship to a local plantation owner to strengthen his body and character. For the first half of the novel, John embarks on numerous adventures in the fields, and on the roads and railroads of Alabama and Florida, embodying in many ways the rootlessness of blues lyrics. When John grows to adulthood, he marries his love, Lucy (each is named after and partially based upon Hurston’s own parents), and settles in Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville, Florida, where they are drawn to the freshness of the all-black community. Yet in a clear parallel to the troubled wandering of his youth, John also engages in numerous liaisons with other women, leading to the dissolution of his marriage. Beyond his personal flaws, however, John Buddy’s role as a preacher, to say nothing of his rural Southern background, affords Hurston the chance to

display the rich reserves of folklore that she had compiled in the 1920s. John's sermon on the creation in Genesis, for instance, embodies the call-and-response form of African American songs and sermons with a degree of authenticity seldom seen, least of all in prose fiction:

When God said, ha!
 Let us make man
 And the elders upon the altar cried, ha!
 If you make man, ha!
 He will sin
 God my master, ha!
 Father!! Ha-aa!
 I am the teeth of time
 That comprehended de dust of de earth
 And weighed de hills in scales
 That painted de rainbow dat marks de end of de parting storm
 Measured the seas in de holler of my hand
 That held de elements in a unbroken chain of controllment.
 Make man, ha!
 If he sin I will redeem him.³²

John's sermon serves the polyvalent purpose of capturing African rhythms, revising or signifying upon a central text of African American life and spirituality, and calling for the preacher's own redemption from a life of sin and tragedy. In his lengthy portrayal of God's power in the sermon, he implicitly pleads for his own resurrection, one that he never fully completes. Nevertheless, Hurston traces a complex portrait of the links between black folk life and religious texts that she would amplify throughout her career.

The work that followed *Jonah's Gourd Vine* into print, *Mules and Men*, is a groundbreaking anthropological work containing the results of the research into black folklore that Hurston had conducted under Charlotte Osgood Mason. Centered in and around Eatonville, *Mules* compelled Hurston to defamiliarize herself with the folk-based milieu of her childhood, as she had worn it so tightly it fit her "like a tight chemise," even as it sustained her through matriculation at Washington, DC's Howard University and New York City's Barnard College.³³ At the latter, Hurston faced the challenges of being the lone African American in her classes, but ultimately benefited from studying anthropology under the auspices of Columbia University's Franz Boas, who introduced cultural relativism to his field. Along with the tightly controlled finances she secured from her agreement with Mason, Hurston used Boas's lessons to help facilitate the perspective in *Mules*, which posits

Eatonville and its rural black life as having inherent value, rather than being the site of pathology. The book's narrative rotates around the porch of Joe Clarke's store, where Eatonville's residents gather to buy goods, to socialize, and ritually to tell "lies" – improvised stories – for the purposes of social cohesion, entertainment, and maintenance of a mythology that had originated in slavery or earlier. Each tale allows another insight into African Americans' ways of seeing and being in the world, often lost to those unable to crack the codes of black discourse, as Hurston could not do until she left her home, traveled, and returned with a synthesis of black subjectivity and "white" social science. Notably, *Mules and Men* was not Hurston's first foray into presenting Eatonville to the world. In 1926 she serialized "The Eatonville Anthology," a much shorter snapshot of Eatonville's rituals, via *The Messenger* magazine.

Whereas *Mules and Men* combined Hurston's skills in presenting folklore and an informal narrative voice, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, unquestionably Hurston's most celebrated novel, returns to Eatonville and imbues it with a more explicitly fictional framework. As the story of thrice-married Janie Mae Killicks-Starks-Woods, the novel uses Eatonville as the site that both enables and limits women's search for the horizon, where they can meet their dreams. The dream that drives Janie arises from a blooming peach tree, a metaphor for her sexual development and the possibilities of mutually satisfying love and communication. Janie marries thrice, the first time to Logan Killicks, at the behest of her grandmother, who wants Janie to avoid being raped and used by white men as she and Janie's mother, Leafy, were. Janie leaves Killicks for Joe/Jody Starks, who takes Janie to the new black township of Eatonville, where he sets up his general store and organizes the town's populace, becoming its first mayor. The marriage eventually becomes a loveless one as Joe restricts both Janie's hair and her voice, forbidding her from speaking on the porch where "lies" bind the men. When Joe dies twenty years later, Janie soon finds the companionship of the much younger Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, who, before his eventual death at Janie's hands when he has grown ill from rabies, helps Janie reconnect to the freedom and folk life that she could not experience fully under Joe. As beloved as it is controversial – scholars argue over the meaning of Janie's three marriages vis-à-vis both her perspective and the narrator's – *Their Eyes* was nearly forgotten until author Alice Walker and scholar Robert Hemenway revived interest in it in the 1970s; it is now a standard text in American and African American literature courses.

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), Hurston draws upon the Mosaic legend, the story of the great exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, to retell the narrative within the African American folk tradition. To this day, *Moses*

remains Hurston's least-studied novel, especially compared to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Moses revises Hurston's September 1934 short story "The Fire and the Cloud," which posited Moses as "half man, half god," a figure standing halfway between the divine and the earthly.³⁴ Equally important is the radical move Hurston attempts by suggesting that Moses and the Hebrews in bondage in Egypt are analogous to African Americans. The Hebrews speak in Black English and some contemporary slang, are kept in slavery, must withstand various forms of overt racist oppression, and are more deeply tied culturally to the land of their oppressors than they would readily admit. Invariably, Hurston portrays the Egyptians and Pharaoh as utterly irrational, yet possessing absolute hegemony over the Israelite body. "The Hebrew womb," for example, "had fallen under the heel of Pharaoh. A ruler great in his newness and new in his greatness had arisen in Egypt and he had said, 'This is law. Hebrew boys shall not be born. All offenders against this law shall suffer death by drowning.'"³⁵ Hebrew women consequently begin shuddering with "terror at the indifference of their wombs to the Egyptian law."³⁶

Hurston inserts both dramatic tension and greater irony into the legend by making two crucial moves: (1) minimizing the role of God and (2) raising Moses from the role as a mere prophet for God to that of a true leader and messianic figure. Robert Hemenway asserts correctly that Hurston recognizes the power of the Mosaic myth in African American culture; it undergirds narratives as diverse as folk tales such as "When the People Could Fly," which tells of an African American griot who teaches other slaves how to fly to freedom, or the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." Slave narrators such as Frederick Douglass frequently compared themselves to biblical prophets, just as Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman was known as "the Moses of her people." Moses' *humanity* as a leader is Hurston's focus; his adopted siblings, Aaron and Miriam, frequently chide him for his arrogance, which they believe to be a product of his mysterious heritage, which could be either Hebrew or Egyptian. Hurston alternately portrays Moses as great prophet, hero, and anti-hero, inasmuch as he is a decidedly flawed leader of even more flawed people who both admire and revile him by turns. He is both trickster and outcast, showing his color- and materialism-obsessed people the many self-imposed limits that threaten to destroy them. In casting the Hebrews in this light, Hurston suggests a crisis in black leadership that Schuyler also recognized. That is to say, the Hebrews, like African Americans, have been beset with leaders who "are much too sensitive to the wishes of the people but [that are] too unconscious of their needs" and have "a big idea of [their] own importance."³⁷

In Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes found a sympathetic spirit and voice, a fellow artisan of folk languages who saw the full potential of African American vernacular in all its forms and employed it with great success. Beyond being a friend and protégé of both Hurston and Hughes, Brown also engaged in extensive research of black folk forms, largely while he taught at Negro colleges – today’s historically black colleges and universities – in the 1920s. From the perspective gained through his researches and with an immense collection of material at hand, in the 1930s Brown undertook the same mission that his peers had in the previous decade: take the art that is black folk language and transform it into written poetry. Via the creation and publication of his masterful collection, *Southern Road* (1932), Brown played as crucial a role as Hughes and Hurston in rescuing Black English from white and black critics’ ridicule and diminution. As a result, Brown also became one of the most important critics of African American literature. He reviewed, for example, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, praising the author for her talent in “the recording and the creation of folk-speech,” and *Mules and Men*, which he found exceptional for its generally accurate rendering of folk tales.³⁸ In these same reviews, however, Brown reveals his main point of contention with Hurston, one similar to Richard Wright’s: Hurston’s focus upon the dynamics and folk life of African American communities, especially all-black ones, at the expense of the “bitter” feelings African Americans have regarding racism and poverty. The balance of this tally leaves a deficit of “the total truth” regarding black life.³⁹

Brown’s own poetry from *Southern Road* attempts to restore this truth by capturing the rhythms of the blues and the cadences and colors of rural Southern black speech patterns, often tied with references to and approximations of the sound of the railroad. In the process, Brown incorporates such folk legends as Casey Jones, Stagolee, John Henry, and many others. While the subjects of the poems vary widely, Brown’s portrait of black life in the South is one of impermanence, in which life, livelihood, and living spaces alternate between becoming loci of joy and sadness, subject to the whims of Southern peonage, racism, economic misfortune, and the wrath of nature. In the collection’s eponymous poem, Brown reproduces a chain gang’s song to depict the dissolution of the prisoner’s family while he is incarcerated in a system of abuse and misery. Each grunt the singer emits accentuates his crime of murder, his children’s disappearance and fall into prostitution, and his wife’s illness, as well as his own abuse by the white gang boss. The chain gang becomes hell, the prisoner’s eternal physical and psychic damnation.⁴⁰

In "Memphis Blues," the narrator compares the legendary Southern city on the Mississippi to its ancient namesake by the Nile, noting that both cities have been and are equally subject to destruction, whether by the rivers upon which they depend, by the winds of hurricanes and tornadoes, or by fire brought on by decadence. The poem's narrator berates the people of Memphis, from preachers and working men to blues singers and derelicts, asking them "Watcha gonna do" when Memphis's apocalypse occurs.⁴¹ "Strong Men" signifies upon Carl Sandburg's poem "Upstream" by retracing the history of African Americans from slavery until the poem's present, a history in which "strong men" and women are challenged to maintain their strength even as they are "broke ... like oxen," "scourged," "cooped," and "penned" in kitchens and factories. The poem's overwhelming irony increases each time the refrain of "The strong men keep a-comin' on/The strong men git stronger" is repeated.⁴² Just as in his much later "Old Lem," "Strong Men" delineates the process of continuous exploitation that has marked African American experiences.

Brown also celebrates black life on the streets of America's cities, on the roads and railroads, and in its many sites where folk culture flourishes. When considered as a whole, *Southern Road* reveals a fusion of the folk forms that united Brown with his peers and with the goals of Alain Locke's essay "The New Negro," while anticipating Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in its determination to show the intensity and complexities of black struggle.

These complexities would find even greater expression in the work of the artists who inherited the legacy of the 1930s' shift to social realism. Where Sterling Brown and Richard Wright fused the language of the folk with proletarian struggle, novelist and short story author Chester Himes transformed that language to fit a more organic urban naturalism than found in many of his contemporaries' work. His landmark novels of the social realist movement, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lone Crusade* (1947), are among the finest to emerge from both the genre and the decade. Both are set in Los Angeles's wartime manufacturing industries, where struggles with racism, labor strife, political radicalism, and ethnic tensions abounded during the war, leading to numerous riots and altering Los Angeles's social dynamics for decades. In several respects, Himes's novels draw directly from the currency that Richard Wright established in *Native Son*: urban setting; triangulated conflicts between African Americans, capitalists, and radical whites; the fact and threat of violence and struggle; connections between racial tensions and black sexuality; and so on. Himes differs from Wright in both the depth and

the complexity with which he depicts black life in Los Angeles. Equally important, Himes reveals himself as one of the pioneers of the “hard-boiled” aesthetic in fiction, a peer to Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and many others. All develop the language experiments of such modernists as Ernest Hemingway to discover graphically how the working class speaks and acts in its struggles against industrialism and overwhelming political corruption. In *If He Hollers’s* Bob Jones and *Lonely Crusade’s* Lee Gordon, Himes developed protagonists who are in many ways the antithesis of Wright’s Bigger Thomas, yet who still expose the brutality of black life in the 1940s as stunningly as *Native Son* illustrated the narrow possibilities of black life in the Great Depression and beyond.

Ralph Ellison famously took Wright to task for creating in Bigger Thomas a protagonist that Wright “presented as a near-subhuman indictment of white oppression” or, put another way, “Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that.”⁴³ Himes’s protagonists, in contrast, are educated, intellectual, and urbane, yet still encounter the most depressingly mundane aspects of racism. Unlike Bigger Thomas, Jones and Gordon possess their own voices and can express fully their frustrations, and not necessarily because of their educations. Each has developed his individual agency over time, whether in the South, in the Midwest, or in the putatively more open frontier of the West, manifested in Los Angeles. By setting these novels in Los Angeles, Himes creates a fresher milieu in which to see how racism migrated to all parts of the nation. As they work in the city’s war industries, Jones and Gordon accentuate the apparent implacability of racism, whether amongst union members, radical leaders, or business owners. Each finds himself caught up in or committing violent acts that cross racial lines, despite his attempts at economic mobility. Both revise Wright’s Bigger, giving him some of the humanity that Ellison believed Wright had refused him.

If Himes’s fiction simultaneously draws upon, contributes to, and advances generic movements in American and African American literature, Dorothy West’s first of two novels, *The Living Is Easy* (1948; *The Wedding* was published in 1995, three years before West’s death), comprises many of the trends that arose during the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances. At once an impressive example of literary realism and naturalism, *The Living Is Easy* also stands apart as one of few extended works of satire by African American women and a pioneering migration narrative. Its lampooning of the African American middle class highlights that aggregate’s shallowness and irrelevance in ways that anticipate Ralph Ellison’s frequent jabs, in *Invisible Man* (1952), at black

radicalism and the uplift narrative that has defined African American politics since Reconstruction. As the editor of the acclaimed but short-lived Marxist journals *Challenge* (1934) and *New Challenge* (1937), West had intimate knowledge of the black Left; through her equally close associations with other literary figures who had their start during the New Negro Renaissance, West also knew how debilitating the middle-class imperative to improve the “race’s” status could be to the individual and her imagination.

When *The Living Is Easy*’s Cleo Judson (née Jericho) migrates from the poverty and racism of her native South Carolina to marry a rich black Boston merchant, she ascends to the high ranks of the black middle class, which affords her many opportunities to observe the paucity of values amongst her new peers, a quasi-vacuum filled only with desire to become more like the neurotic white elite. Cleo uses relentless and often vicious plotting to bring her Southern family close to her, maintain her position and status in Boston’s black bourgeoisie, and attempt to cast her rural, pastoral beginnings aside. While West’s novel was far from the first to satirize the black middle class – Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) and George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931), among others, preceded it – its intense focus upon the bourgeoisie anticipates the more detailed and controversial findings of E. Franklin Frazier’s landmark sociological study, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), albeit with invective and irony instead of Frazier’s polemic. West employs Cleo Judson’s social climbing, moreover, to criticize the limited roles for women in black middle-class circles, in which agency and identity must be snatched from a patriarchal system. The requirements of this system lead to Cleo’s slow, but inevitable dissolution into someone lacking either love or family ties.

Both Himes and West echo and presage issues that would find even greater resonance in the decades to come, as the foundational radicalism, proto-feminism, and appreciation of the folk found new expression in the literature of the 1950s and 1960s, the decades in which the modern Civil Rights Movement would come to dominate African American discourse.

Notes

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Books,” *The Crisis* 33 (December 1926): 81.
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* 33 (October 1926): 290–297; 295.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* [1940] (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986), p. 316.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
7. Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston, TX: Rice University Press, 1988), p. 217.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165.
9. George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 435.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 386.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
12. Quoted in Donald Ogden Stewart, *Fighting Words* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1940), pp. 58–59.
13. Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), p. 98.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 98–99.
16. Jeffrey Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 1.
17. Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* 122 (June 23, 1926): 692–694; 694.
18. *Ibid.*, 693.
19. Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” *The World Tomorrow* 11 (May 1928): 214–216; 215.
20. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1: 1902–1941: *I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986), pp. 153–154.
21. Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter* [1930] (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 123.
22. Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 268–269.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
24. William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* [1941] (Chatham, NJ: Chatham Bookseller, 1969), pp. 52–53.
25. Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” *The New Challenge: A Literary Quarterly* 2.2 (1937): 53–65; 53.
26. William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 7.
27. Du Bois, “Criteria,” 295; Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro* [1925] (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 3–16; p. 11.
28. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*, p. 88.
29. Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” *The New Masses* 25 (October 5, 1937), 22–23; 23.
30. Alain Locke, “Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us,” *Opportunity* 16.1 (January 1938): 7–11, 27; 10.
31. Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” p. 23.
32. Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* [1934] (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), pp. 175–176.
33. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* [1935] (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 1.

34. Robert E. Hemenway, *Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 258, 256.
35. Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* [1939] (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. 1.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
38. Sterling Brown, "Old Time Tales," *The New Masses* 25 (February 1936): 24-25; 25; "“Luck Is a Fortune’,” *The Nation* 145 (October 16, 1937): 409-410; 409.
39. Brown, "Old Time Tales."
40. Sterling Brown, *Southern Road* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), pp. 46-47.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
43. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act* [1964] (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 107-143; p. 114.

Weaving jagged words: the black Left, 1930s–1940s

NICOLE WALIGORA-DAVIS

“The story of the depression as it affected American Negroes, has not yet been adequately attempted,” wrote W. E. B. Du Bois more than three decades later.¹ Arguably this story must engage labor, social, and legal histories of race and gender discrimination, and the effects of migration and urbanization on black Americans, and consider African Americans’ increasing turn to a leftist politics invested in the black working class. Such a full narrative as this is quintessential for understanding black literary responses to the Depression. The US Unemployment Census revealed that 58 percent of black women and 43 percent of black men eligible for work were unemployed in 1931.² For Du Bois, “the economic change” wrought by the Depression on the black middle class was nothing short of “revolutionary.” He calculated that “more than a third” of African Americans in US cities were driven to “public charity.” An even greater economic challenge, he argued, was presented by “the loss of thousands of farms and homes, the disappearance of savings among the rising Negro middle class, the collapse of Negro business.”³ According to Robert Bone, the 1930s witnessed a “new social consciousness” marked by organized protests, unionism, and a Left-leaning political culture.⁴ Seeking approaches to documenting black life during the 1930s and 1940s, many African American writers turned to the social sciences and Marxist ideology. These artists transformed a tradition of African American expressive culture (literature, painting, sculpture, dance, theater, and music) and reformulated a black aesthetic, and some, like Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Frank Marshall Davis, participated in larger global movements against fascism, imperialism, and colonialism.

The economic pressures of the Depression intensified an evolving class consciousness and class struggle (concepts that had long been analyzed by the Communist Party), and further catalyzed the turn toward “proletarian” and “protest” writing during the 1930s. According to American Communist Party

(CPUSA) member Howard Johnson, during the second half of the 1930s “75% of black cultural figures had Party membership or maintained regular meaningful contact with the Party.”⁵ Communism underscored the importance of a working-class consciousness and interracialism in the project of racial equality, social justice, and democracy. It pointed to the interconnection between racism and capitalism, and the status of culture in any reformation of black civil rights. For African American writers like Langston Hughes, Alabama’s conviction of nine African Americans for the alleged gang rape of two white women underscored the effects of Jim Crow on black and white lives in the South, and the raced and gendered consequences of the Depression on the working class. This event impacted black leftist politics, mobilizing black intellectuals and activists in support of African American civil and legal rights, deepening African American participation in the Communist Party, and intensifying international scrutiny of American race relations.

On March 26, 1931, a posse led by Sheriff Charlie Latham met a Southern Railroad freight train heading to Memphis, Tennessee in Paint Rock, Alabama. Under orders from the Jackson County sheriff, to “capture every negro on the train and bring them to Scottsboro,” they arrested nine African American men aged thirteen to twenty.⁶ What began as a battery complaint filed by some white vagabonds against a group of black men who were also travelling illegally ended when two white female riders claimed that they had been raped. Huntsville, Alabama residents Ruby Bates and Victoria Price were hoping to find work. Traveling illegally and unescorted, they dressed in men’s overalls and caps to minimize the risk of unwanted attention. While armed deputies corralled African American riders, Bates and Price lied and accused these black suspects of rape, minimizing the damage to their reputation that having ridden voluntarily alongside a group of African American males ensured. Congress passed the Mann Act in 1910 to curb white slavery and prostitution. By 1917 its legislative reach extended to consensual sexual liaisons that crossed state lines. Traveling alone among male riders, Bates and Price risked being suspected of prostitution and possible prosecution under the Mann Act. Their allegation eventually condemned eight of the nine black youths to death and instigated a legal battle that continued for the next twenty years and that included two US Supreme Court hearings (*Powell v. Alabama* 1932, *Norris v. State of Alabama* 1935). This case focused national and international attention on African American civil rights, and entrenched black writers like Hughes in a radical leftist politics. Their charge revived the supremacist myth of white women endangered by savage black male predators used to legitimate the violence of lynch mobs. Sexual assault had long served as a

convenient ruse to mask and violently respond to the economic and social anxieties presented by the post-emancipation wage-laboring black body.

Labeled the “Scottsboro boys,” these defendants’ encounter with American legal culture pointed to a shift in racial violence: the justice of kangaroo courts increasingly supplanted the labor of lynch mobs, promising a swift execution under the sanction of law. In this case, kangaroo justice translated into an absence of adequate legal counsel, a summary trial, and a speedy conviction by an all-white jury. This case was a reminder of the limited legal protections and recourse available to black Americans in a country where poll taxes coupled with extralegal violence curbed black suffrage and when political primaries excluded black participation (*Grovey v. Townsend* 1935). While the NACCP initially hesitated to defend them, the Communist-affiliated International Labor Defense (ILD) provided legal counsel and rallied national support for these youths and their families. The CPUSA’s involvement reflected their recent emphasis on racial inequality as a national problem and their acknowledgment of black self-determination as essential to a Communist-based anti-capitalist campaign. Their legal advocacy and demonstrations on these defendants’ behalf intensified black interest and participation in the Communist Party’s interracial and international civil and economic rights activism.

“The Scottsboro, Alabama cases have brought squarely before the American Negro the question of his attitude toward Communism,” penned Du Bois to *The Crisis* readers in September 1931.⁷ Communism foregrounded the economic imperatives governing political society that many black leftists understood were constituted and reconstituted by race. Black laborers were already hurting before the market crashed and the national economy slumped. With increasing mechanization in industry and agriculture in the late 1920s, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs traditionally held by blacks were being taken by whites. Employment sectors to which many of these black laborers turned – bituminous coal-mining, steel, and iron – also faced adverse economic conditions: constricted markets, increased mechanization, and elevated unemployment among white workers, translated into fewer jobs and lower pay for black workers.⁸ Key components of Roosevelt’s comprehensive legislative recovery package (the New Deal), the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) (1933) exacerbated the acute economic distress the Depression wrought on black Americans, deepening race-based class inequities. Intended to offset the effect of declining crop prices and restore farmers’ consumer power by subsidizing a reduction in crop size, the AAA effectively furthered the displacement of black agricultural

workers from farming that had already begun with falling crop prices in the international market.⁹ Black tenants had little recourse to compel landowners to (fairly) distribute their portion of federal payments allocated for limiting acreage production. (The federal government later made direct payments to tenants.)¹⁰ According to Mark Solomon, the NIRA “‘codes of fair competition’” hurt black workers, by causing “‘joblessness where wage equality was applied, and by low-paying jobs where wage equality was not applied.’”¹¹ The CPUSA campaigned to reform labor and socioeconomic conditions, by improving wages, protecting workers’ interests, and addressing employment discrimination. Communists formed multiracial labor unions like the National Miners Union, the Auto Workers Union, and the Share Croppers Union. Splintering from the American Federation of Labor in 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, an umbrella group tethering unions nationwide, permitted black membership, pushed to end discriminatory employment practices, underscored the mutual interests of black and white workers, and affected racial politics.

The global political crises articulated in Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, coupled with distressed economies, prompted a shift in Communist policy in the mid-1930s toward a “united” or “Popular Front.”¹² Communists worldwide were encouraged to “join with Socialists, trade unionists, and liberals in a ‘Broad People’s Front’ to stop the rise of fascism and prevent a new world war,” writes Mark Naison.¹³ This move toward coalition building and anti-fascism was part of a strategy for political transformation that also looked to culture as a critical site of contestation in the campaign for democracy. In 1936 the National Negro Congress (NNC) launched in Chicago with a multiracial and politically diverse gathering. While not an explicitly Communist organization, the NNC’s cultural nationalism extended the Popular Front’s culture war, and impacted black leftists within and outside the CPUSA. The NNC’s comprehensive civil rights initiative assailed racial stereotypes, promoted a distinctive black culture, and privileged “human rights above property rights.”¹⁴ Their “black ‘cultural front’” influenced both the Chicago Renaissance (1935–50) and black and Left relations.¹⁵ The nationalist tenor invigorating Richard Wright’s 1937 thesis on black culture, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” reflected a tension between integrationism and black nationalism or race consciousness apparent in African American expressive culture that persisted after, and arguably as a measured if not defiant response to, the Popular Front’s retreat from the “national question” toward the more vigorously anti-fascist and anti-colonialist policy of the “Broad People’s Front.”¹⁶ Many black writers

participated in Communist-sponsored groups like the John Reed Club and later the League of American Writers, agencies sympathetic to the CPUSA's commitment to engaging the question of culture. African American writers regularly published in official and Communist-affiliated publications including the *Southern Worker*, *Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, *Liberator*, and *Left Review*.

The stable employment, research opportunities, and artistic venues made available by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to black artists and intellectuals invariably enabled many of these interventions in black culture and global governance crises. Part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the WPA launched 1.4 million projects nationwide, provided employment to thousands of Americans, and created a handful of arts-based programs, including the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) and the Federal Theatre Project. Zora Neale Hurston, Theodore Ward, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, and Willard Motley were among the numerous black artists employed by the FWP. Part of the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, one of two groups of African American advisors to the federal administration, Sterling Brown was appointed Editor on Negro Affairs from 1936 to 1940. Brown oversaw the studies on African Americans produced by the FWP, including Zora Neale Hurston's fieldwork on, and preservation of, African American folklore in Florida. A noted poet and literary critic, Brown was committed to the rigorous study and preservation of black culture. Described by Wahneema Lubiano as "a founding literary theorist," his administrative role in the FWP is part of a larger creative and critical legacy that has significantly shaped the field of African American studies.¹⁷

Characterized by Bone as a "cultural anteroom" for Communist thought, many of the artists in Richard Wright's South Side Writers' Group figured prominently in the Chicago Renaissance (1935–50) and worked for the Illinois Federal Writers' Project.¹⁸ Illinois Federal Art Program workers were similarly engaged in producing an aesthetic reflective of the experiences of so many African Americans who had left the South as part of the Great Migration. According to Mullen, African American artists blended "modernism, primitive technique, historical black sources, and a radical documentary impulse," offering a rich visual and discursive vocabulary charting the effects of the migration, urbanism, poverty, and racial violence on African Americans.¹⁹ The South Side Community Art Center, one of many facilities across the nation begun by the WPA's Community Arts Center Program, served as an important venue for this rearticulation of a black aesthetic, providing a space for black and white artists like Gwendolyn Brooks and

Jack Conroy to work alongside one another.²⁰ These rearticulations of black culture and black aesthetics appeared across an array of artistic forms, including literature, dance, theater, and painting. Figures like dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham, who worked for a period as a director for the Federal Theatre Project, influenced modern dance and founded the first major African American dance group, the Ballet Nègre in 1937.

In 1931 Langston Hughes, one of the most visible poets during the New Negro Renaissance, visited some of the Scottsboro boys incarcerated at Alabama's Kilby prison. Driving through Paint Rock, the town where the black freight riders were initially arrested, he penned and sent a one-stanza appraisal to Carl Van Vechten, "The Town of Scottsboro."²¹ What Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad cites as "the driving public force in Hughes's move to the left," the Scottsboro tragedy deepened and intensified Hughes's radicalism, his commitment to social, political, and economic equality, and to the plight of the working class.²² For Hughes, Scottsboro served as a barometer measuring the socioeconomic and legal conditions of African Americans. Across his writings, he repeatedly returned to this watershed case in order to promote black citizenship and black civil rights. This case consolidated the racialization of due process, the criminalization of the black body, the economic distress of black workers, the Depression, and the exploitative dimensions of capitalism.

Within months of the Scottsboro convictions, Hughes published a one-act Marxist agitprop verse drama, *Scottsboro, Limited*, in the October 1931 issue of *New Masses*. Opening in Los Angeles in 1932, *Scottsboro, Limited* contributed to an international discourse on the case. Performed in Paris and Moscow, the play was later translated into Russian.²³ The following year, Hughes reprinted the script along with his four Scottsboro poems and illustrations by Prentiss Taylor, and donated the publication proceeds to the Scottsboro Defense Fund. The simplicity of this play – its spare setting, anonymous characters, and single act – thickens the descriptive weight of the dramatic elements used to narrate the storyline. Identifying his characters exclusively in terms of their race, sex, and occupation, Hughes fashions them as representatives of specific raced or gendered types. In so doing he extends his critique beyond the particularities of this historic event to American race relations, sexual politics, and legal culture, and places in relief these signifying coordinates.

Hughes frames *Scottsboro, Limited* from the perspective of eight accused African Americans, a viewpoint that, as his dramatization reveals, mattered little to the allegations made, the charges filed, the trial that ensued, and the sentences rendered. With this distinctive lens, Hughes challenges the politics

of representation: he signifies on the sufficiency and the legality of these defendants' limited access to legal counsel during the initial trial, while concurrently remarking on the historic discounting of and even legislatively sanctioned prohibition on black testimony. Hughes offers a caustic description of the collusion of the court with mob violence in *Scottsboro, Limited*. His compactly staged trial sequence captures the lethal efficiency of the Jim Crow court. By eliminating the prosecutor, defense attorney, and any evidence, and by interpolating the audience into the jury, Hughes stresses the cumulative effect of the procedural irregularities that marred the Jim Crow court: here the Judge presupposes the defendants' guilt – the female plaintiffs' testimony only confirms his presumption. Hughes's concluding call to interracial solidarity and a revolutionary labor movement among black and white laborers functioned like an anthem in his writings, and sought to promote social and economic justice.

Like many socially engaged African American artists in the years preceding and during the Second World War, Langston Hughes addressed the radical disjuncture between American political idealism and state practice. He situated the troubled status of black civil rights within a larger global crisis of human and political rights reflected in colonialism and in the proliferation of fascism in Europe. African Americans protested Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, a country whose sovereignty had long served as an example of black self-determination. Her independence countermanded a racialized political discourse challenging the political fitness and suitability of the black body for civil rights. Hughes remained concerned about the expansion of fascism evidenced in the invasion of Ethiopia. He engaged the US occupation in Haiti, the "imperialist dictatorship" in Japan, the violence in China, and, with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, Franco's Spain.²⁴ His writings on this war advocated democracy and political self-determination, tying the experiences of occupied Spain to segregated black America. Titles of poems like "From Spain to Alabama" and "Postcard from Spain: Addressed to Alabama" articulate Hughes's comparativist approach to Spaniards and black Americans, an approach producing a geopolitical immediacy to this campaign for black Americans. Pulling his title directly from the headlines of a local Spanish newspaper, in "Air Raid: Barcelona" Hughes records the sonic and somatic dimensions of aerial bombing: the wailing echo of sirens warning of an incoming raid are matched by the sound of explosives. Through repetition, Hughes creates a rhythm that figurally and aurally reenacts the penetrating, lethal effects of bombing; the cacophonous repercussive sound and the repercussions of its effect: death.²⁵

Arriving in Madrid in 1937 as a correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Cleveland Call and Post*, and *Globe*, Hughes detailed his impressions of the war and documented the contributions of African American volunteers in the International Brigade. His war coverage permitted black audiences to identify with an embattled Spain by linking the political crisis there to the racial tyranny of Jim Crow and the hypocrisy of American political ideology. Hughes located Franco's Spain as another moment within a larger global crisis in human rights in which black Americans were equally at risk. According to Hughes, fascism promised "terror and segregation for all the darker peoples of the earth."²⁶ By Hughes's accounting, if fascism was the common enemy then solidarity would be the most effective weapon: "When the black and white workers of America learn to stand together in the same fashion, no oppressive forces in the world can hurt them."²⁷

Only months after returning from Spain, Hughes staged *Don't You Want to Be Free? A Poetry Play: From Slavery through the Blues to Now – and Then Some! – with Singing, Music and Dancing* (1938) at the Harlem Suitcase Theater, a performance house he established that year with Louise Thompson. More than two hundred gathered on opening night and within a year there were over 135 performances in Harlem.²⁸ According to Rampersad, this play outstripped the success of productions being staged by the Harlem Unit of the Federal Theatre Project and helped to "launch new radical black theater groups in at least four additional cities, including Chicago and Los Angeles."²⁹ *Don't You Want to Be Free?* strings together Hughes's poetry, Negro spirituals, blues, and dance, creating a unique dramatic form that the playwright revived and particularized to specific political issues, including the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement, in addition to creating entirely new dramas (*For This We Fight*, 1944, and *The Ballot and Me*, 1956).³⁰ With its emphasis on expropriated labor and freedom, resistance and revolution, *Don't You Want to Be Free?* resembled black leftist cultural productions during the late 1930s recounting slavery, black rebellion, and revolution, namely W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1938). Hughes's 1938 edition for *One Act Play* begins with slavery and ends with a description of black unionization and the labor movement in the mid-1930s. His description of the overseer/slave trader as the historical antecedent for landowners holding sway over black tenant farmers indicts some of the most common contractual labor arrangements for rural blacks – sharecropping, peonage, and tenant farming – as simply another brand of slavery.

Like Hughes, Richard Wright believed in the socially transformative power of language. Wright's association with Communism began in 1933 after he

joined the Chicago branch of the John Reed Club, an organization for writers and artists affiliated with the CPUSA.³¹ Quickly appointed secretary, he served on the editorial board of the Chicago club's literary magazine, *The Left Front*. During the 1930s his articles, poems, and stories appeared in left magazines including the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*. His Marxist "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (*New Challenge*, 1937) offered guidelines for African American literature and a theory of black culture that were undoubtedly influenced by the NNC's cultural front. Characterizing the African American literary tradition as "prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America," Wright claimed that these authors had pandered to whites, and created a literature that overlooked the psychosocial dimensions of black life, remaining disconnected from the masses, the very site of social consciousness.³² Insisting that black writers shape the values and elevate the consciousness of the African American community, he underscored the necessity for a proletarian focused fiction honoring the complexity of black life and black working-class perspectives – celebrating its folklore, folk culture, and folk wisdom.³³ For Wright, this culture wielded the potential to deepen social understanding and end the suffering to which it so ably testified.³⁴ Nonetheless, Wright's assessment of black literature overgeneralized and overlooked the significant contributions made by writers like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Charles Chesnutt, to deepening an appreciation of African American folk culture.

The following year Harper and Brothers published Wright's Marxist short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection that earned him the Federal Writers' Project *Story Magazine* prize for best work. His focus on black rural life, black working-class consciousness, and interracial cooperation reflected Wright's dutiful application of his own thesis in "Blueprint." Alain Locke voiced the enthusiasm many felt toward the book, describing it in *Opportunity* as "a well-merited literary launching for what must be watched as a major literary career."³⁵ The 1940 reprint of *Uncle Tom's Children* included two additional pieces: his autobiographical essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (originally published in *American Stuff: WPA Writers' Anthology*, 1937) and a short story, "Bright and Morning Star." Wright paints a graphic, unapologetic account of the poverty, hardships, racism, and violence shaping the daily lives of African Americans during the interwar period. Collectively, these stories function as a composite of American race relations, relations whose boundaries and racial codes are so absolute that by Wright's accounting any single misstep by a black American will likely produce lethal consequences. The story "Long Black Song" features child's

play gone woefully wrong that ends in lynching and exile. "Down by the Riverside" details a man's desperate attempt to protect his family during the Great Flood of 1927 and ends in his arrest and what promises to be certain death.

In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Wright uses personal experiences to interrogate the racial protocols delimiting black life during segregation. The irony of Wright's essay title is not lost on readers who quickly learn that "ethics" here is a generic reference to rules. Justice, fairness, and respect – the terms associated with "ethics" – are antithetical to the project of segregation. Wright maps his own education in the politics of segregation: "My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small," reads the opening line.³⁶ The essay serves as a manual, and each memory outlines the rigid codes of conduct and the consequences of presumed, alleged, and actual infringements of this peculiar system. Wright references everything from being assaulted because he failed to address a young white male as "Sir" to the castration of a bell-boy who had had sex with a white prostitute. *Uncle Tom's Children* offers a powerful testament to the multiple, creative, and courageous expressions of black resistance to a social economy designed to demean and dehumanize African Americans.

Communism and interracial cooperation emerge in this collection as partial solutions to poverty and racial discrimination. Wright's Johnny-Boy, a Communist, risks his life to improve labor conditions and campaign for interracial unity among black workers in "Bright and Morning Star." Signifying on Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Wright's collection responds to the saturated representational discourse (D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, 1915; *Trader Horn*, 1931; *King Kong*, 1933) that had replaced Stowe's injured Tom with the spectacle of the dangerous black male body.³⁷ Recounting the lethal outcome of four African American teenagers' horseplay, "Big Boy Leaves Home" recalibrates the racialization of injury in the Jim Crow South. Exhausted from play and an unrelenting summer heat, they seek refuge by skinny dipping in the pond of a white property owner. Their fun ends, however, as abruptly as it began: the spectacle of these four naked young men inspires fear in a young white woman who, these teenagers realize too late, is standing by the pond within arm's reach of their clothes. To her they represent a real and ever present threat, not the least of which being sexual predators. She calls out to her white companion Jim who, armed with a gun, responds to young Big Boy's plea to retrieve his clothes with a rifle shot. The scuffle that ensues between them captures the mutual discomfort produced by this racial encounter.

Wright's description of Big Boy as "[b]lack and naked" places in relief the vulnerability and shared innocence of these young men. He exposes the scale of racial violence and suggests in this moment the disproportionate and violent response of white supremacists to blackness. For as Wright deftly illustrates, it is not the seemingly endangered white female whose life is in jeopardy, but rather that of these young men. By figuring Big Boy as naked and unarmed Wright underscores that this contest is precisely about self-defense, forcing his readers to reckon with the ways in which Jim Crow assails black dignity and, in this case, black masculinity.

The first African American novel featured as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) sold 250,000 copies within a month. Learning about the performative power of "words as weapons" through his reading of H. L. Mencken, in *Native Son* Wright sought to raise social consciousness. Divided into three sections – Fear, Flight, and Fate – *Native Son* bears the influence of urban naturalism, existentialism, Communism, Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and sociology. This novel tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor twenty-year-old African American living in Chicago's Black Belt during the 1930s. Hours into his new position as chauffeur for an affluent family, the Daltons, Bigger accidentally kills his employer's daughter, Mary. Wright outlines Bigger's flight and eventual capture, and his brief trial, conviction, and sentence to death row. Through Bigger, Wright interrogated the material and psychic costs of being routinely denied employment. Wright engaged the effects of being denied access to social spaces and its privileges, and of being part of a community historically represented as deviant and dangerous.

By Wright's own admission, "science," specifically psychology and the Chicago School sociology, provided him with the vernacular to articulate a black experience that he intimately understood, but whose meaning he did not fully comprehend: "it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me."³⁸ In *Native Son*, Wright marries the social sciences to urban realism. Abandoned buildings with "their blind eyes, buildings like skeletons standing with snow on their bones," appear as one among a series of descriptions in which architecture and the cityscape itself offer sociological evidence of the effects of poverty and racism on housing practices and urban geography.³⁹ Rejecting the pity and sympathy *Uncle Tom's Children* elicited in its readership, with Bigger, Wright sought to embody a specific social type. "The birth of Bigger Thomas," Wright explains, "goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and

more than you suspect.”⁴⁰ Wright challenged the politics of representation and its damning psychological and legal effects on black Americans. “Maybe they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an ape-like animal,” ponders a convicted Bigger. By comparing Bigger to a rat that intrudes on the Thomases’ one-room apartment, Wright points to the primitivism frequently attributed to blacks. His references to W. S. Dyke’s popular safari film *Trader Horn* (1931), with its all too familiar depiction of African cannibals and their captive, a white female turned “wild” by the wilderness, align with his figuration of the media’s response to Mary’s death and her black assailant. These passages read like extracts from the *Chicago Tribune*’s coverage of Robert Nixon, an African American male accused of sexually assaulting and beating to death Florence Johnson with a brick, around whom Wright loosely based his portrait of Bigger. The *Tribune* characterized Nixon as “a slow witted colored youth,” and undoubtedly secured audience attention with its inflammatory headlines: “Brick Moron Tells of Killing Two Women”; “Science Traps Moron in 5 Murders.”⁴¹

The *New Yorker* critic, Clifton Fadiman, lauded *Native Son* as “the most powerful American novel to appear since *The Grapes of Wrath*.” Malcolm Cowley felt the same. Ralph Ellison’s review for *New Masses* (August 1941) credited Wright with transforming the African American literary tradition and locating fictional representations of blacks within a larger, American literary field.⁴² Cultural nationalist Alain Locke demanded that criticism of *Native Son* move beyond the reflexive racial provincialism that singularly read this text in terms of “Negro life and art” rather than in relation to literary trends toward realism. Locke voiced the question Bigger Thomas raised for many – “And whose ‘native son’ is he, anyway?” For Locke, Wright’s rendering of Bigger was less of an assault against blackness than it was a commentary on American society.⁴³ African American writers like James Baldwin balked at Wright’s “Bigger,” worried that with this “incarnation of a myth” Wright extended the conviction that “in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse.”⁴⁴ By 1963 Ralph Ellison had also adopted a much more critical tone toward Wright and his novel. He argued that by framing Bigger Thomas as a “near-subhuman indictment of white oppression,” Wright privileged how whites imagined blacks over how blacks recognized themselves.⁴⁵

While Wright’s fiction, particularly *Native Son*, has historically been labeled an example of “protest novels,” critic Jerry Ward, Jr. urges reading this heading in relation to its cultural moment so that we might better understand what this specific categorization “observes,” and how it inadequately frames

Wright's work.⁴⁶ The term "protest" holds a tremendous amount of signifying weight: within the literary tradition it immediately conjured "race" and operated as a veiled description for what was taken to be second-rate work.⁴⁷ *Native Son* frequently produced one of two reactions from readers – praise or defensiveness: "Everyone who read it was forced to acknowledge the uncanny accuracy of Wright's vision or to become exceptionally defensive in retorting that such horrors as Wright described could not happen in America."⁴⁸ According to Ward, the critical debate over *Native Son* arises in part from the shift this novel made in the African American literary tradition as a text whose unrelenting critique of American racism as a national problem refused to let readers off the hook, and demanded an engagement with and awakened a sense of guilt over the status and treatment of blacks in the USA.⁴⁹

Although Wright had already formally broken with the Communist Party by the publication of *Native Son*, he remained faithful to fundamental Marxist ideologies, including a developmental reading of history and a sense of the economic underpinnings governing political systems. He remained committed to the problem of economic and racial inequality, to the idea of labor solidarity, and to the anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist ideology that shaped so much of the CP's platform. Expressing his disappointment in a Party that with the rise of fascism in the mid-1930s shifted its agenda away from the question of black equality, Wright bemoaned, "I'll be for them, even though they are not for me."⁵⁰ For Wright, both the Left and the Right failed to fully understand or adequately respond to "the Negro problem." The Left's attempts to squarely locate black experiences in the USA within a "class-war frame of reference" refused the "roots" of this problem which lay in "American culture as a whole." According to Wright, the Left sought "to anchor the Negro problem to a patriotism of global time and space, which robs the problem of its reality and urgency, of its concreteness and tragedy."⁵¹ The Right, in turn, denied the shared effects of slavery and Jim Crow on the black community, and regarded racism as an occurrence among sets of individuals rather than as a systemic problem within the social structure.⁵²

According to biographer Hazel Rowley, by October 1942 Wright's photo-essay *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) had aroused the FBI's attention. The USA was in its eleventh month of full participation in the Allied front against Germany, Japan, and Italy, when a disgruntled white male reader drafted a complaint to the Secretary of War insisting that the contents of *12 Million Black Voices* might precipitate "many forms of sabotage and result in a general breakdown of morale."⁵³ He filed his objections during a moment when

heightened anxieties over espionage and treason had already led the federal government to turn on its own citizens and legal aliens, and relocate 110,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese foreign nationals from their homes into internment camps; and when A. Philip Randolph's proposed march on Washington to protest segregation in the armed forces compelled Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in defense industries. Divided into four parts – "Our Strange Birth, "Inheritors of Slavery," "Death on the City Pavements," "Men in the Making," – *12 Million* offers a deeply nationalist and historically materialist reading of blacks in the New World that frames black history within larger economic and labor shifts.

Sketching the "complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization," Wright positions blacks as barometers measuring the social costs of capitalism. "We black folk, our history and our present being," Wright argues, "are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America If we black folk perish, America will perish."⁵⁴ Remarking on the nation's economic drivers ("the Lords of the Land – operators of the plantations; the Bosses of the Buildings – owners of industry; and the vast numbers of poor white workers – our immediate competitors in the daily struggle for bread"), Wright marks the intersection of race and class in the production of American society. He describes an economic pyramid where race enforces the vertical relations among these groups.⁵⁵

Wright collaborated with Edwin Rosskam, who selected from FSA photographs documenting the Depression to compile this photo-history of black labor. Armed with image and words, Wright waged a dual assault against the discursive and visual codes that serviced the slave trade, slavery, colonialism, segregation, and, in the USA, a racial caste system. By giving a "face" to the sociological and empirical data he threads together, Wright personalizes the human costs of racism and capitalism across generations. Readers indirectly "witness" the interiors of sparsely furnished black homes with their newspapered walls, and broken toilets shared by multiple families cramped together in rodent-infested tenements. They perceive the heat and strain of black farmers whom Wright tells us made up more than half of the African American labor force, 75 percent of whom remained sharecroppers in the 1930s.⁵⁶

Wright's 1945 memoir *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, extends the sociological critique present in *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*. He reveals just how quickly African Americans' dreams of a North free from the racial violence and discrimination of a segregated South were eclipsed by the grim realities of urban living and the persistent character of American racism. Residential segregation remained firmly entrenched in America's Northern

industrial centers. "My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies," Wright recalls. "The din of the city entered my consciousness, entered to remain for years to come."⁵⁷ With his migration from the South to Chicago he "fled one insecurity and had embraced another."⁵⁸ In fiction and nonfiction Wright returned to the racial geography of Chicago's South Side, presenting this segregated corridor as a sample of black urban life.

In their landmark study on black Americans in Chicago, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945) St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton described the city's Black Belt as "a city within a city – a narrow tongue of land, seven miles in length and one and one-half miles in width, where more than 300,000 Negroes are packed solidly – in the heart of Midwest Metropolis."⁵⁹ Rowley reports that by 1927 Chicago was both the "second largest black city" and "the most residentially segregated city in the nation."⁶⁰ Following the Supreme Court's decision in *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), the legal character of residential segregation shifted from state and municipal racial zoning ordinances to racially restrictive covenants issued by developers, individual home owners, or neighborhoods, that created deed restrictions prohibiting black property ownership, leasing, and occupancy in white neighborhoods.⁶¹ These covenants transformed Chicago's residential geography, excluding African Americans from renting, living in, and owning property throughout much of the city. With *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948) the US Supreme Court ruled restrictive covenants unconstitutional. Wright's encounter with and description of the city, however, was hardly unfamiliar. In 1939, Waters Turpin turned to Chicago's South Side in his fictional account of one family's participation in the Great Migration.

Waters Turpin's *O Canaan!* (1939) rehearses familiar tropes of American idealism and rugged individualism that shaped much of early twentieth-century American realist narratives. This myth shaped the ambitions of black economic migrants seeking improved, if not stable, income opportunities, access to education, and property ownership. Here urban expansion conjoins the grammar of American frontierism to the ideology of the melting pot and assimilation, transforming Chicago into a microcosm for the nation and its national fantasies: "that great titan city of the Northern prairie, sprawled about an inland ocean, would fling out its wide-stretching arms to receive them [black migrants] . . . And somehow the lusty texture of its pioneer bloodstream would sweep up theirs – for better or for worse."⁶² Turpin's Bensons join the exodus of African Americans from the South and arrive in Chicago's South Side. Joe Benson immediately enrolls in school, becomes a

community leader, opens a successful store, and partners with a fellow Southerner and restaurateur to purchase rental property. The materialism underwriting the bootstrap individualism configuring Benson's "American Dream" – home ownership, financial stability, luxury and ease, respectability – refuses compassion, excuse, or social accountability and turns instead to strands of Social Darwinism. "[F]rom the bottom lands of the South," Joe was "among those best fitted to survive."⁶³ What Benson derides as a tradition of "can't do" that must be replaced by an attitude of "can do" is echoed in the callous determination of his son Dan, a First World War veteran: "The war taught me ... in life it's every man for himself and to hell with the hindmost."⁶⁴ In Ralph Ellison's 1941 estimation, *O Canaan* failed to account for the place of blacks in American society, a failure resulting from an outmoded literary style: "In the sense that a technique is both a reflection and an instrument of consciousness, Turpin's relation to his material is that of an obstetrician attempting with obsolete instruments to aid a birth he sees only cloudily through blurred vision."⁶⁵

Wright was among numerous black artists and intellectuals, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Horace Cayton, Margaret Walker, Theodore Ward, Archibald Motley, Waters Turpin, Frank Marshall Davis, and Ralph Ellison who either were writing in Chicago or located the city centrally in their work. Their creative and scholastic output signaled another resurgence in black expressive traditions and announced a second Chicago Renaissance. Bill Mullen points to the "mutually constitutive" relationship between this cultural renaissance and the CPUSA's Popular Front/Negro People's Front, writing "Chicago's cultural 'renaissance' of the 1935–1950 period is better understood as the first of an extraordinary rapprochement between African-Americans and white members of the U.S. Left around debate and struggle for a new 'American Negro' culture."⁶⁶ The dense concentration of African Americans in industrial centers caused by the Great Migration magnified the need to address the coordinates of black working-class life in the context of urbanity. The Chicago School of Sociology, particularly the work of Horace Cayton, J. G. St. Clair Drake, and Robert Park, influenced Chicago's black cultural nationalists, offering thick description for the environmental factors shaping African American life. Chicago Renaissance artists offered a psychological and sociological critique on the relationship between race and space, frequently taking up the racially gendered complexities of social poverty for black city dwellers.

"Seems like the white folks just erbout owns this whole worl!," bemoans Wright's militant Reverend Taylor in "Fire and Cloud": "We blacks folks is jus

los in one big white fog.”⁶⁷ The symbolic cadence of Wright’s imagery in “Fire and Cloud” was familiar racial shorthand for African American audiences privy to Theodore Ward’s award-winning 1937 stage production *Big White Fog*. Ward worked for the Negro unit of Chicago’s Federal Theatre Project and was also a member of Wright’s South Side Writers’ Group, a cadre whose membership included Ben Davis, Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Marion Perkins, Marian Minus, Ed Bland, Alberta Sims, and Fern Gayden. By 1939, Ward had produced a dramatic adaption of Wright’s “Bright and Morning Star.” A Guggenheim and National Theatre fellow, Ward spoke to the suitability of black drama for tackling complex social and political problems. Ward contended that to see theater as simply entertainment demeans, if not altogether denies, the audience’s critical capacity.⁶⁸ Speaking at a benefit for the Negro Playwrights Company in the fall of 1940, Ward insisted that African American theater could realize the very best in drama: offering a candid study of daily life that “boldly and honestly deals with the major problems of the world, and that depends on the deepest interest and aspirations of the race for its dignity and inspiration.”⁶⁹ This tide-change in dramatic renderings of black life is aptly captured in the subtitle for *New York Times* theater critic Brooks Atkinson’s review of a Lincoln Theatre performance of *Big White Fog* in October 1940: “Negro Playwright’s Company Opens a New Theatre Movement in Harlem with ‘Big White Fog.’”⁷⁰

Characteristic of Communism’s late 1930s shift to a cultural front, in *Big White Fog* Ward refused the dominant racial tropes of the “happy ducky,” the “Uncle Tom,” and the “buffoon,” and offered instead a nuanced portrait of blacks. *Big White Fog* narrates a decade (1922–32) in the life of the Masons, a black Southern migrant family, and their efforts to negotiate a raced and gendered job ceiling and a depressed economy. They find themselves facing eviction by the drama’s end after the first late (rent/mortgage) payment in fifteen years. The homelessness threatening this family dilates the question of what it means to be “at home” for blacks in the United States that resonates throughout the drama. Homelessness here expresses a literal and spiritual unmooring partially realized by the supply and adequate housing pressures blacks confronted because of racially restricted rental and purchasing requirements. It signifies upon the “fog” that Ward designates as the symbol for an intractable racism that leads some to frustration and disillusionment. No longer believing in the possibility of a “tomorrow” for blacks in the United States, family patriarch Victor Mason transfers his faith into Garvey’s Back to Africa campaign, investing all of his family’s savings into purchasing stocks in a failing Black Star Line. Alongside references to the war-era race riots in East

St. Louis, Tulsa, and Washington, Ward inserts Percy Mason, a First World War veteran, who in exchange for campaigning for democracy abroad has been stripped of his uniform by an angry mob back home, a violence that has questioned his right to the very democratic privileges for which Percy has jeopardized his life.

The challenge to black civil liberties wrought on Percy's flesh finds a less physical but nonetheless damaging expression in the inability of blacks to secure skilled and professional employment despite their educational training, and to secure quality and fair housing. By the end, Wanda, the only remaining employed member of the family, is arrested for prostitution after having resorted to soliciting to pay the family's rent. Her body proves a more valued commodity for exchange than either her unemployed father's and brother's labor, or the worn family furnishings her mother futilely attempts to sell. Economics figures centrally throughout the play, lying at the core of the subsistence pressures placed on this family, as much as it grounds competing strategies for social transformation – socialism, black nationalism, capitalism, and communism. And while Victor Mason's socialist ambitions to build a republic in Africa appear as naive as he is disillusioned, the capitalist model of exploitation embodied in his brother-in-law, a Pullman porter qua slum-lord, by Victor's accounting merits little praise. A slum-lord is no more than "a leech on the blood of your own people," says an outraged Victor.⁷¹ Casting blacks and whites marching together to protest the Masons' eviction, Ward underscores the power and possibility behind a Communist model of "the underprivileged" combating shared social problems.⁷² The ending exchange between Victor and his son, as the dying patriarch strains but remains unable to "see" this interracial body of demonstrators, gestures to yet another effect of "fog." While racism curbs African American life chances and social outcomes, Ward insists that an inability to imagine a united black and white front is its own brand of blindness.

Ward returned to the problem of dispossession in *Our Lan'* (1941). Penned during the Second World War, *Our Lan'* turns to another corner of US military history – the Civil War – in which both democracy and the status of black Americans took central stage. The drama begins in January 1865, two years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and significantly in the days immediately after Union Army General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, redistributing land formerly owned by Southern slaveholders to newly freed slaves. Arguably, Ward's turn to these final months of the Civil War, to this promise of "40 acres and a mule," and to the emergence of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction period, are part of a larger engagement with

questions of black civil identity and the relationship of the state to African Americans that continued to vex his contemporary moment. Significantly, while 1940 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment, the abolition of slavery, it was a year in which Thurgood Marshall stood before the Supreme Court (*Chambers v. Florida*) in defense of four African American males whose police-coerced confessions led to their wrongful convictions for capital murder and subsequent death sentences. Although Marshall prevailed and the court overturned the convictions, creating a landmark victory over the abrogation of due process, American racism remained stubbornly resilient.

Ward's play affirmed African Americans' right to call the USA home: our land. Ward's imagined dispute between a former slave and a Southern planter over land awarded to ex-slaves by General Sherman is about more than property, but the earned right to the full privileges of American citizenship: "Yoh think if we ain't got no lan', we have t'wuk for nothin'. But yuh never git way wid it. This is ouah lan'. We done wukked'n paid for it. Not only here, but all ovah this cruel South."⁷³ Ward's title – *Our Lan'* – captures the displacement and homelessness confronted by so many Americans during the Great Depression (a loss underscored in best-selling Depression era novels like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), and cues the deeper, historic problem of black citizenship. *Our Lan'* revisits Reconstruction, the era when African Americans struggled to adapt to their newfound freedom in a country that continued to question whether freedom equated with full civil privileges while the South retaliated with the Black Codes. Resisting repressive labor arrangements – sharecropping, peonage, and tenant farming – Ward's emancipated slaves form a self-sustaining community on a reappropriated plantation. An experiment in freedom, Ward's imagined farm-based cooperative remembers the formation of black townships ("freedom colonies") like Princeville, North Carolina (1865) and Eatonville, Florida (1887).

Remarking on the interdependency between political and economic rights, Ward illustrates the fragility of black freedom and postbellum claims to property. The tickets Sherman issued to slaves in lieu of deeds that allegedly secured their claims to former plantations appear warrantless against the property deeds and military-backed presence of a Southern landowner returning from the war. The legal indefensibility of a "ticket" in a society where deeds are the measure of property ownerships appears as one among a series of failed promises. In the words of the plantation's former overseer, Hank Sanders, "Well, Ah suppose the Gen'l [Sherman] must have his little joke. But don't you know yuh must have a deed to own land?"⁷⁴ With neither sufficient

nor adequately enforced legislative protections, these black farmers struggle to sell and secure a fair price for their crops in the marketplace, and to protect their claim to the land. The play ends tragically with this community futilely defending its property rights in an unequal firefight with the military.

Black leftists like journalist and poet Frank Marshall Davis took a more direct approach to critiquing American race relations during the Second World War. Davis shared the prevalent philosophy of the black press: "the widest possible publicity to the many instances of racism and the dissatisfaction of Afro-America with the status quo."⁷⁵ His "Passing Parade" columns for the Associated Negro Press (1943–44) located the crisis in American race relations within a global politics of world war, peace, anti-fascism, and postwar rebuilding, urging minorities across racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries to unite together to "rescue American democracy."⁷⁶ He pointed to the moral failure of a state that required military participation from black Americans while withholding the ballot, fingered a government that interned its own citizens, and insisted that racism was simply "a springboard to fascism."⁷⁷ In 1943 he recommended forming an interracial Council Against Racism "to combat prevailing myths about distinctions between humans based on the bogey of race."⁷⁸ His political affiliations and outspokenness eventually placed him under the attention of the FBI and House Un-American Activities Committee.⁷⁹ Poetry was another medium through which Davis regularly engaged the specter of race.

"I was a weaver of jagged words," responded Davis to those critics who complained that his verse was "bitter" and "cynical."⁸⁰ Nick Aaron Ford dismissed Davis's social-realist poetry as propaganda, insisting that the poet's militancy militated against "winning sympathetic consideration."⁸¹ Such narrow readings restage what John Edgar Tidwell argues was "the familiar critique of thirties social poetry as being little more than uncontrolled, unsystematic, and unconvincing proselytizing."⁸² His *Black Man's Verse* (1935) set the pace for the kind of realist radical verse he sustained throughout the collections that followed: *I Am a Negro* (1937) and *Through Sepia Eyes* (1938). (*Through Sepia Eyes* would later be reissued as part of *47th Street: Poems* [1948]).⁸³ Seeking an approach to account for black American life during the 1930s and 1940s, Davis latched onto jazz and blues as models for his poetic style. He associated the fluid form of free verse with the improvisational aesthetic of jazz, each a countermanding to tradition and convention.⁸⁴ Revising poetic and musical codes, Davis frequently imagined his poems as musical compositions: "The Slave (For Bass Viol)," "Love Notes at Night (Melody for a Zither)." The instrumental accompaniment in "Lynched (Symphonic Interlude for Twenty-One Selected Instruments)"

redoubles the graphic intensity of Davis's verses. A discordant and abruptly ended saxophone accompaniment in the final stanza aurally marks the lynching victim's death and the state's routinized dismissal of murder: "Back in town/ a report he [Sheriff] sets down/ 'Died/ at the hands of parties unknown.'" ⁸⁵ According to Tidwell, Davis recognized that his unbridled commentaries, particularly with respect to the war, would be "seen as subversive and Communist simply because he didn't 'close ranks.'" ⁸⁶ His politics and poetics restage the commitments James Smethurst attributes to "Red Negro Poets," including an emphasis on internationalism, a vernacular targeting the perspective of the "masses," and a "dissemination of urban forms of African American popular culture – music, rhetoric, and so on – as well as rural 'folk forms' as the paradigms for poetry." ⁸⁷ History and representations of urban life also structured his critiques of American culture. Davis's "What Do You Want America?" reflects this vernacular orientation toward the folk. ⁸⁸ Here he undercuts the logic supporting the *mission civilatrice* underwriting slavery, colonialism, and a contemporary American racial imaginary: "(How many black men vote in Georgia?)/Mobs, chain gangs down South/Tuberculosis up North/ – so now I am civilized." ⁸⁹

Like Davis, Chicago Renaissance poet Margaret Walker refused to shy away from the realities of black life both in America's cities and in rural Southern landscapes. Five decades after publishing her award-winning *For My People* (1942), Margaret Walker described artists' unchanging responsibility to "[show] the way we must go for a better life" during an interview with Maryemma Graham. ⁹⁰ Stephen Benét described Walker's "sincerity" and "candor" which is "at times disquieting" in its deft recounting of black Americans' experiences. ⁹¹ Benét's characterization of Walker's vernacular as "set for voice and the blues" underscores an oral folk tradition that critics like Jerry Ward note suffuses this collection. ⁹² Walker's poetry conjoined "the world of the Harlem Renaissance and the '30s, and the new world order that emerged with the end of World War II and the '50s," writes Ward. ⁹³ Walker's title poem, "For My People," serves as an anthem and a revolutionary call to battle for an inclusive world. Balancing an empathic with a militant tone, Walker paints histories of survival. She attends to laborers whose tireless toil fails to yield financial stability, to those who attended school despite societal restrictions and defied social expectations, to those who died from poverty-related illnesses and racial violence, and to the "lost disinherited and dispossessed" in American cities. Walker addresses the "hopeless," the "blundering and groping and floundering," those "standing staring trying to fashion a better way," and seeks to rally those frustrated in their efforts to achieve

social equality.⁹⁴ A part of the WPA Chicago Writers' Project and Wright's South Side Writers' Group, Walker had already published poetry in *The Crisis*, in *Opportunity*, and in *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, by the time *For My People* appeared. Written as her master's thesis, many of the twenty-six poems in this collection turn toward the South and vocalize the hardships of African American communities. "Southern Song" and "Sorrow Home" frame the South as a site both longed for and dangerous, captioning the psychological tension between wanting to return home to the warmth of "southern suns" and the nightmare of lynch mobs and chain gangs.⁹⁵ Whether in sonnet, rhyme, free verse, or ballad, Walker's voice is deeply personal and intimate, even autobiographical in places, as she shares memories and stories of fearless hustlers like Stagolee or of hard-edged women like Kissie Lee.

Willard Motley and Ann Petry also produced an urban realism attentive to the material and psychological impact of social poverty on the underclass. Motley's 1947 bestseller *Knock on Any Door* sold 47,000 copies in its first weeks of publication and was compared by reviewers to Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*. According to biographer Robert Fleming, Motley's emphasis on the economic imperatives molding social outcomes resonated with American audiences devastated by the Depression, offering an effective counterpoint to American individualism and success narratives.⁹⁶ In this naturalist fiction, Motley shifts away from the race novel, recounting the effects of the Depression, the juvenile justice system, and Chicago's slums on Nick Romano, an Italian immigrant's son. Motley points the finger at a failed juvenile justice system that not only mistakenly sentences an innocent kid to reform school, but produces in turn a hardened criminal. Disillusioned, disaffected, publicly humiliated, and harshly punished by guards, Motley's incarcerated juvenile offenders regard the law and its enforcers as enemies. He paints in technicolor the harsh conditions found within America's prisons that further alienate the imprisoned and reproduce the very violence that jails promise to curb. Defense attorney Andrew Morton's closing arguments during Nick's criminal trial for the murder of a police officer indict society for Nick's criminal deviancy, and insist that Nick was already dead – his future foreclosed – the moment he entered reform school. Motley equates Nick to a cornered mouse whose premature death at the hands of society (symbolized here as a cat) is a foregone conclusion. By twenty-one, this former altar boy and son of a working-class immigrant family is executed for murder.

Like Motley, Ann Petry's personification of the city telescopes the environmental drivers determining social outcomes. Awarded Houghton Mifflin's annual literary fellowship for a first novel, *The Street* (1946) is a gritty study on

the effects of race, gender, and class on blacks in urban America. Petry maps the gendered coordinates of racial discrimination and poverty, outlining single-parent Lutie Johnson's struggle to raise her son Bub. The 1940 Census reported that there were 912,420 non-white domestic service workers. Published two years after Gunnar Myrdal's analysis of an American racial caste system (*American Dilemma*), and a year after *Black Metropolis*, Petry's feminist novel was a stark reminder of the potential sexual exploitation and racial humiliation endured by black women. "In the Black Belts of the northern cities," laments Richard Wright, "our women are the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives."⁹⁷ The cold temperatures and the unrelenting wind that risks sweeping up everyone and everything in its reach in the opening of the novel anticipates Petry's critique of a seemingly all-encompassing assault against black life occurring in America's urban slums. As Brooks did in *Bronzeville*, Petry captures the intimacy of violence: she depicts a violence so routine that its familiarity tragically appears almost banal. Petry addresses the psychic and material costs attached to the absence of a living wage; the destruction of privacy and physical vulnerability of cramped tenements; and the moral and ethical challenges of poverty that wield the potential to rob futures and compromise children. Compared by reviewers in the late 1940s and 1950s to the hardboiled fiction of Chester Himes and William Attaway and to the protest fiction of Wright's *Native Son*,⁹⁸ Petry's Lutie Johnson significantly emerges as the world struggles to articulate and enforce human rights in the aftermath of the Second World War. Her text calls the question of racial and gender discrimination and violence in the United States in the midst of global movements toward peace and decolonization campaigns, and as radical black leftists' critiques are increasingly under siege.

"Today in this country it is becoming standard reaction to call anything 'Communist' and therefore subversive and unpatriotic, which anybody for any reasons dislikes," wrote Du Bois in July 1950.⁹⁹ He was responding to the Secretary of State Dean Acheson's dismissal of the Peace Information Center's advocacy for the Stockholm Appeal as simply "a propaganda trick in the spurious 'peace offensive' of the Soviet Union."¹⁰⁰ The Second World War foregrounded an international crisis in human rights that led to the formation of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the UN Genocide Convention. It inspired a peace movement coinciding with an even more strident anti-Communism indicative of the onset of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism. As chairman of the Peace Information Center, Du Bois summoned the weight of the climate shift toward Communism in the USA, a downward spiral already marked by the 1939 Nazi-Soviet

non-aggression pact and by the efforts of the Dies Committee to rout out Communism in the 1930s, efforts leading to McCarthy's House Un-American Activities hearings in the 1950s. Hughes's "Goodbye, Christ" (1932), a socialist poem written during a trip to the Soviet Union shortly after the death penalty verdicts against the Scottsboro boys, along with his columns in the *Chicago Defender*, placed him under the FBI's watchful eye in the 1940s. Under the weight of federal surveillance and investigation and of public and potential political reprisals for "Goodbye, Christ," Hughes disavowed the poem and denied any formal affiliation with the Communist Party in his testimony before McCarthy's committee in 1953.¹⁰¹

Frustrated and disillusioned, Richard Wright left the United States permanently in 1947 for the war-ravaged, post-armistice cityscape of Paris, a departure somewhat stalled by difficulties securing a passport. For refusing to register the Peace Information Center as "agents of a foreign principal" Du Bois was indicted in 1950. Although he was eventually acquitted, the State Department withheld his passport until 1958. Du Bois's radical politics had already led to his dismissal from the NAACP in 1948, shortly after completing work on their UN petition, *An Appeal to the World* (1947), a document highlighting the discrimination suffered by black American citizens. While reflecting on the deepening division between Du Bois and the NAACP, David Levering Lewis recounts Du Bois's forced departure on the heels of a memorandum Du Bois sent berating Walter White's acceptance of a position to act as "special consultant to the U.S. delegation to the UN." According to Lewis, White's acceptance was "tantamount to collusion, and placed the NAACP in the lap of the United States government."¹⁰² In 1950 the State Department rescinded Paul Robeson's passport. Robeson was a vehement defender of black civil liberties and a proponent of anti-colonialism. He was an NNC member, leader within the Council on African Affairs, and organizer of a hundred-day American Crusade to End Lynching (1946). In 1951 Paul Robeson presented the 250-page petition *We Charge Genocide*, on behalf of the Communist Civil Rights Congress, to the Fifth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations gathered in Paris. Labeling racism expressed by the government as a crime, in *To Secure These Rights* (1947) the CRC called attention to the status of postwar civil rights, upset allegations that lynching was declining, and troubled both the efficacy of the Department of Justice's Division of Civil Rights (1939) and the impact of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights policy recommendations to protect and enhance these privileges. This petition cued the widening gap in approaches to black enfranchisement, to guaranteeing legal protection for blacks, and to securing black dignity by the NAACP and leftist organizations

like the CRC. While the NAACP had submitted its own petition to the UN to protest US racial violence and discrimination, the CRC's charges of genocide, in Carol Anderson's words, "set out to prove governmental intent." At a moment when such radical expressions of protest risked further aligning black civil rights claims with Soviet critiques of American democracy, and risked the brand of disloyalty and the ire of the public and federal administration, Walter White worked to discredit the CRC.¹⁰³

The encounters Hughes, Wright, Du Bois, and Robeson had with the state constitute more than a catalogue of persecution; the encounters are a barometer for measuring the atmospheric pressure of radical leftist politics in the 1940s, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War. Harold Cruse mirrored the umbrage many felt toward Communism. In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) Cruse narrowly read the relation between the black Left and the CP, effectively dismissing the significant culture work and political relays that arose from this interaction. In William J. Maxwell's words, Cruse "tracked the faults of forty years of black writing to a program of white Communist discipline born in the 1920s."¹⁰⁴ Cruse charged, "Unable to arrive at any philosophical conclusions of their own as a black intelligentsia, the leading literary lights of the 1920s substituted the Communist Left-wing philosophy of the 1930s, and thus were intellectually side-tracked for the remainder of their productive years."¹⁰⁵ Manning Marable notes the effect of the black middle class on the CPUSA. In his words, "The black middle class's almost complete capitulation to anti-communism not only liquidated the moderately progressive impulse of the New Deal years and 1945–1946; it made the Negroes unwitting accomplices of a Cold War domestic policy which was directly both racist and politically reactionary."¹⁰⁶ The black Left's interventions in a long legacy of grass-roots activism and mass protest among African Americans, its emphasis on working-class consciousness and the socio-economic dimensions of black life, its advocacy of interracialism and global perspective, were but a piece of the significant contributions made within both African American literary studies and civil and human rights writ large. Black leftists' attentiveness to the problem of culture as the problem of democracy, and to the international dimensions of domestic race relations, remains as relevant today as it was in the 1930s and 1940s.

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Writing the American story, 1945–1952

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Any consideration of the period 1945–52 in African American letters must take as its starting point Richard Wright, whose masterful autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), is arguably the most important life story from the culture since Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*,¹ which in many ways it contradicted. Ushering in the postwar era, it was an angry, bitter book, despite the fact that it focuses on Wright's personal experiences from age four to his flight from the South in 1927 at nineteen. It spoke eloquently for the rage that motivated African Americans in the days after the Second World War, a conflict that they had helped win, in terms of both the heroism of black servicemen and the stateside employment of black workers in war factories. Veterans who had been welcomed abroad as liberating heroes were unwilling to return to submissive places in American society, which meant back seats on buses, restrictive covenants that kept blacks out of white neighborhoods, segregated and inferior schools, and voting restrictions in Southern states. While many African Americans therefore continued the "Great Migration" to Northern cities after the war, those remaining or returning to the South increasingly began to join resistance organizations, which ultimately led to the powerful influence of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Congress of Racial Equality (founded 1942), the redefinition of the long-existing National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and, perhaps most importantly, the creation in 1957 of the Southern Christian Leadership Council. The new spirit of militancy was stoked by black newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and was encouraged by the work of radical white scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal, whose 1942 classic *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* mounted a revised and extended version of Du Bois's assertion that the color line was the central problem for twentieth-century

America. Increasingly too, Americans came to see local racial conflict in terms of a global struggle; black newspapers told their readers about the revolts in Africa and Asia of colonized people of color, and of important Supreme Court decisions such as 1944's *Smith v. Allwright* that would culminate in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* in 1954. Finally, segregation on buses, housing restrictions, and "separate but equal" schools were all declared unconstitutional.

Postwar black writers were in a sense returning to homefront duty themselves, as before the war many of them had been enlisted by their government in an effort to record the words and folklore of the people; therefore, any consideration of black writing after the Second World War has to be cognizant of the powerful effect of the Depression era Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s and its employment of such artists as Wright, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, Frank Yerby, Arna Bontemps, William Attaway, Willard Motley, Zora Neale Hurston, and Margaret Walker, who would create powerful works after the war. Many of these writers were sent out to document black life and history, interviewing former slaves, rural farmers, and inhabitants of Northern ghettos. This sociological/journalistic endeavor paid off handsomely in the detailed novels and stories that were written after the war, particularly as Wright's blockbuster *Native Son* popularized a new kind of black naturalism, which called for a curious combination of graphic detail and gothic treatment. Concurrently, the reinvigorated interest in the folk, their music, religion, and popular culture, enriched the work of writers who aimed at portraits more centrally about African Americans themselves, rather than the line of conflict with white culture. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the other monumental bookend to this period, would mount a narrative that united these seemingly divided streams of African American expression. It is fascinating to note that Ellison began the novel in 1945, after reading *Black Boy*.

After the war, black citizens were championed by President Truman, who was all too aware that the Cold War struggle for the hearts and minds of newly decolonized people of color across the world could hardly be won if the United States continued to oppress its own minorities. His election in 1948 led to the integration of the Armed Services, the creation of the Civil Rights Commission, and laws protecting voting rights. In popular culture, the integration of baseball when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 was a racial milestone, as was the growing popularity of black music – jazz, bop, and early rock and roll – and gospel and blues artists such as Mahalia Jackson.

Yet Truman had also made the fateful decision to unleash nuclear destruction into the world in August 1945. The ensuing Cold War with the Russians made the specter of nuclear destruction an everyday presence for all Americans, adding to the existential drift of fifties writing. Ironically, the new mood of dread was settling in after the most prosperous economic expansion in American history, made possible by wartime industries and growing consumer needs for automobiles, new labor-saving devices, and larger and better-equipped homes. African Americans justifiably felt anger at being shut out of this booming economy, and especially resented the nation's continued exclusion of black children from the better schools. Their arguments were strengthened by the effect of the Holocaust, a racial catastrophe that had been uncovered by liberating American troops in Germany, many of them African American. The global outcry against this monumental horror brought a new kind of attention to the continuing history of racial oppression and terror in the United States, and was a factor in the increasing involvement of blacks and Jews in political struggle, a history that has recently been powerfully rehearsed by Eric J. Sundquist (2005). (Indeed, just before writing *Invisible Man*, Ellison had been working on a Nazi prison camp novel.) As Ellison put it, it was time for blacks to become "the conscience of the United States." From the rubble of the global conflict, the newly powerful nation needed "a new humanism" as it confronted its hold on "the destructive-creative potential of atomic power."²

Black Boy, though written with a new global perspective, was mainly a look backward at the despair, hunger, and rupturing migrations of the Great Depression, which had afflicted all Americans. The original title of the book, *American Hunger*, was meant in a universal way as well. Wright never earned either a high school or a college degree, but he profited from many years of contact with some of the nation's leading sociologists at the University of Chicago. His work with the Federal Writers' Project acquainted him with every level of black urban life, complementing his store of memories from his Southern childhood in rural and small-town settings, and young manhood in Memphis. *Black Boy's* meditative, reflective elements are often in sharp contrast to the vividly realized scenes of racial violence, sexuality, and suffering. In many ways the book is really a *Künstlerroman*, along the lines of James Joyce's paradigmatic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), wherein we understand the gradual unfolding of an unusually sensitive and receptive creativity, one generated equally by a poetic reception of the natural world and by a horrified reaction to brutality and eruptive force. Many of the early passages limning plants, scents, landscapes, animals, and the weather operate like haiku

(to which he turned later in life) but also echo the lists of nature's wonders found in Whitman. This process of artistic development would be fully illustrated when the second part of the original manuscript for the autobiography, *American Hunger*, was published in 1977.

Black Boy, like many other classics of Southern and American literature, gravitates around the fluctuations, breakups, and reconstitutions of the narrator's family. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles alternately provide shelter and comfort, adjusting to new forms of oppression and prejudice. The tragic deaths of figures such as Uncle Hoskins at the hands of whites become cautionary tales, but also register as haunting signposts of a nation's darker history. Wright's grandmother's strict religion hobbles his desires and creates havoc within the general household, suggesting that what Wright felt were the devastating effects of white-derived religions on African Americans; on the other hand, her discipline and sense of purpose were positive legacies.

Richard's conflicts with his relatives, his yearning for books and the world of ideas, his resistance to religion, makes him an *isolato* within the black community, as his hidden sense of resentment at injustices suffered in the white world forces him to keep silent and thus "invisible" there as well. The long litany of persecutions that Richard endures shows the book's affinities with the slave narrative, as does the book's ending, when the hero seemingly "escapes" the oppressive South for a progressive North, like slave narrators before him. Richard's dogged pursuit of an education against forbidding odds closely aligns him with Frederick Douglass, and is proleptic of Malcolm X; like them he learns words can be weapons, as in the inspiring passages he reads from the acidic journalist/philosopher/gadfly H. L. Mencken.

Years later, Wright would become friends with Chester Himes, who, like Wright, became one of the more celebrated black expatriates, writing from Europe. Himes, Lloyd Brown (1901–2007), Willard Motley (1909–65), Ann Petry, and William Gardner Smith are sometimes grouped as members of the "Wright School," as their brand of black naturalism was inspired by *Native Son*. The young Himes was a "badman" who spent time in prison before embarking on a literary career. His rather genteel upbringing in Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio by his professor father and almost-white mother was no preparation for the racial contradictions he encountered upon leaving home. Very light complexioned himself, he vacillated in his racial stances, and more often than not chose whites as his friends and lovers after enrolling at Ohio State and then afterward, when he was expelled for consorting with prostitutes, a prelude to a criminal career and incarceration. The prison years (1928–36), which included a passionate affair with another inmate, resulted

in an initial novel, *Cast the First Stone*, which was not published until 1952. Himes viewed many mainstream popular movies while in prison, and voraciously read detective and western novels, leading to his often sensational short stories that were published in national magazines such as *Esquire*. Friendships with other writers (such as Langston Hughes, Louis Bromfield, and Jo Sinclair) helped Himes get established as a writer after his release.

Cast the First Stone is one of the most compelling prison narratives in US literature. Jimmy Monroe, a white youth from Mississippi, stands in for Chester Himes. Like him, Jimmy is serving a twenty-year sentence for robbery, has had back injuries, and bears scars from his feuding parents, who have divorced. By making Jimmy white, Himes was able to focus on the struggle to survive the battle with the prison itself, which looms here as a primordial monster, dehumanizing, brutal, filthy, and overcrowded. Jimmy's friends Mal, Blocker, Metz, and Duke Dido all bring out things in him, especially Dido, his yearning but Platonic lover, who kills himself when they are separated at the novel's end. The homoerotics of this prison novel would form a foreground for James Baldwin's boldly gay "white" novel set in Paris, *Giovanni's Room* (1956).

Himes was not the only black writer of the period to expose prison life; Lloyd Brown's *Iron City* (1951) couples this kind of narrative with a political tale reflecting the "red scare" of the McCarthy era. Set in prison, the story centers on Lonnie James, whose Communist associations help frame him for a murder he did not commit. Lloyd, a committed Communist, provides a defiant response to the witch hunts of Congress. His story is told with liberal doses of black folk culture and dialect, but its realism is offset by a magnificent dream sequence that forms the penultimate section of the novel. The diverse inmates create a veritable subset of minority cultures, and their desire for a communal response to injustice offers some hope for the future.

From 1945, when the Soviet threat became manifest during the carving up of defeated Germany and surrounding nations, to the middle of the 1950s, red-baiting was increasingly manifest in official policies. McCarthy's senate investigations and the operations of the House Un-American Activities Committee, coupled with the McCarran Act of 1950 (which set up concentration camps for political prisoners), led to the blacklisting of former and current Communists and "fellow travelers," including many writers and artists, some of them African American. The increased persecution ultimately led many writers, black and white – including Richard Wright – to choose self-exile abroad.

The most prominent member of the "Wright school," however, stayed in the United States to write one of the most shocking and hard-bitten novels

ever written by a black woman. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), a somber, distressing, and powerful story about a black single parent trying to make a home for her son in the slums of Harlem after her husband betrays her, forms a feminine and naturalistic pendant to *Native Son*, rather like the complementarity of the narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs in the preceding century.

Petry, born Ann Lane, grew up in comfortable circumstances in Connecticut and attended the state university. After she married George Petry, she moved to New York and began writing for Harlem newspapers, which gave her an eye for the realistic detail and gripping naturalism that is present on every page of *The Street*. The protagonist, Lutie Johnson, is a hard-working domestic who abides by Ben Franklin's principles and admires her white employers for their Protestant ethic. Her "American dream" is to launch a singing career, but she is stifled. As the novel opens, she is looking for an apartment on seedy 116th Street, a locale that becomes almost a character in itself.

In a flashback, we witness Lutie's employment by the dissolute but well-off Chandlers, a white couple, whose drinking and adultery repel her. Returning to New York, she finds her husband, who has been tending their son, has betrayed her with another woman. Lutie's beauty makes her an attractive prey for Harlem ne'er-do-wells; she is stalked by Jones, a sexually obsessed building superintendent, who seeks revenge for her rejections by corrupting her son, Bub. Others suggest prostitution to her; another "suitor," the corrupt white Harlem businessman Junto, menaces her, and ultimately she protects herself from rape at the hands of Boots Smith, Junto's flunky, by killing him. As the novel concludes, we see Bub is headed to reform school, as Lutie, abandoning him, flees on the train to Chicago. Throughout the story, Lutie and Bub appear doomed by the harsh urban environment, which has all the menace of a jungle: "The street will get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people, slowly, inevitably,"³ a passage that recalls the deterministic writers of an earlier period such as Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and the Paul Laurence Dunbar of *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). Also like the jungle, there is fierce and relentless competition among the denizens for scarce resources; no possibility of a real community exists, a situation one often sees in Wright's Mississippi narratives. Petry introduces us to quite a number of Lutie's neighbors on 116th Street, but they always seem to work at cross-purposes. Lutie seeks refuge in her apartment, but the oppressive canyon of the street has an even more confining variant there; the tenement apartment seems a virtual prison

cell: "All through Harlem ... Dirty, dark, filthy traps ... Click goes the trap when you pay the first month's rent. Walk right in. It's a free country. Dark little hallways. Stinking toilets."⁴ Such passages align Petry with white immigrant writers such as Henry Roth, whose Jewish New Yorkers inhabit apartments much like this; the "trap" of course is redolent of the American Dream itself, a glittering mirage that masks the reality of confining poverty.

The contributions to black naturalism made by William Gardner Smith, who is discussed in Chapter 12, have largely been forgotten, but he created memorable characters who struggled against social injustice. Born in Philadelphia's black ghetto, Smith was devoted to his three younger step-siblings, but struggled with their father. An excellent student, he was strongly affected by Hemingway and Maugham. Securing a job with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, like Petry he acquired vital reporting skills before being drafted into the postwar army, which led to his first novel, a study of relations in Germany after the war, *Last of the Conquerors* (1948). The novel bravely exposed racism in the military and helped contribute to the reforms that were ushered in during the Truman administration.

Naturalism was only one tradition that continued after the war. The African American domestic novel, which had been epitomized by the work of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen during the Harlem Renaissance, continued apace; the black woman's point of view found its most significant other literary exemplar of the period in Dorothy West, author of the impressive first novel *The Living Is Easy* (1948). West was born in 1907 in Boston; her father Christopher, a former slave from Virginia, became a successful fruit importer and the owner of a four-story home. Her father was the model for the novel's central figure, Bart Judson, who also represents both folk culture and the rising new black bourgeoisie. Similarly, West's mother Rachel, born to ex-slaves in rural South Carolina, inspired the creation of Judson's love interest, Cleo. In Boston, the light-skinned Cleo develops disdain for uneducated blacks recently arrived from the South, a sentiment that expands along with the family fortune. Her increasing extravagance ruins the family, and she meddles in her sisters' marriages; at novel's end, Bart, broken, departs for New York to attempt a new beginning after discounting supermarket chains doom his shop. The novel's satiric send-up of the black bourgeoisie often echoes the work of Jessie Fauset, but as Sharon Lynette Jones has recently reminded us, West's work by no means concentrates on upper-class blacks, but instead features members of the entire social "triangle," as Jones describes it, of the folk, the bourgeois, and the proletariat.⁵

Sometimes members of one school belonged to another as well. During this period, many black writers had, as Zora Neale Hurston put it, “hopes of breaking that old silly rule about Negroes not writing about white people.”⁶ Naturalist/protest writers, including Wright, Himes, Petry, and Willard Motley wrote novels that featured white protagonists, and so did “folk”-centered writers, such as Hurston.

Of the more than thirty “white novels” written by blacks between 1945 and 1952, seven were by Frank Yerby, whose monumental sales figures proved that crossing the color line artistically could pay off handsomely. To this day, his sales of over 60 million books worldwide make him the best-selling African American writer in history. Yerby was originally from Augusta, Georgia, but lived in several other places in the South, most significantly Louisiana, where he set his first historical novels, *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), a bestseller and the basis for a popular film, and its 1947 sequel *The Vixens*. In 1950 came *Floodtide* set in antebellum Natchez; *The Golden Hawk* (1948) explores prerevolutionary Haiti and the Caribbean; *Pride’s Castle* (1949) details the career of a nineteenth-century robber baron; *A Woman Called Fancy* (1951) examines prostitution in New Orleans; while *The Saracen Blade* (1952) is set during the crusades of the thirteenth century. Scrupulously researched, chock-a-block with sex, violence, and vibrant period detail, Yerby’s novels were meant to entertain, but a careful reader will find some moving and informative portraits of black characters in the background of the Southern novels’ romantic plots. Yerby had tried to succeed with racial protest stories such as “Health Card” (1944), but ultimately decided that all black writers did not have to write about racial struggle, and that novels written to entertain had a legitimate purpose.

Still, he was never unaware of the plight of diasporan people. The sections dealing with the hoodoo-practicing slave Tante Caleen, her son Achille, and his doomed African wife create unforgettable memories for any reader of *The Foxes of Harrow*. Much later, after overwhelming financial success with his “costume novels,” Yerby would construct others centrally focused on black characters, such as 1969’s *Speak Now*, and his impressive African narrative *The Dahomean* (1971) – his best book – and its US-set sequel *A Darkness at Ingraham’s Crest* (1979). Early critics such as Robert Bone were harshly dismissive of Yerby, but beneath the costumed trappings one often finds some compelling characters, and accurately realized dramatizations of social issues. Recently, Gene Jarrett has issued an anthology of selections from “white” works by black authors, challenging us to rethink the old formula of African American canon formation, that dictated exclusion of works not centrally depicting the race, for “some of our most celebrated African American authors [have]

written remarkable, even beautiful, literature resisting prevailing conventions of racial representation,”⁷ and the period from 1945 to 1952 was rich in such texts. Of course white writers had been writing about blacks for some time, often to great acclaim, such as Gertrude Stein, Carl Van Vechten, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Dubose Heyward (1885–1940), Eugene O’Neill (1888–1953), Paul Green (1894–1981), and Julia Peterkin (1880–1961), to name just a few; in this period, Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) was in fact based on the life of Walter White, the NAACP leader.

Today one of the most widely read African American novels about white folks is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). In the forties, Hurston, who had been the most visible black woman writer in US history – her portrait had appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Review* – was falling from favor, as the protest tradition that was reestablished with *Native Son* in 1940 had dominated black letters for eight years. Like Wright, Hurston was attracted to the possibilities of the Freudian novel, and *Seraph* seems modeled to some extent on Freud’s important essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” The novel’s heroine, Arvay Henson, comes from a poor white family, but, inspired by religion and music, she has higher aspirations, which seem possible when she wins the love of Jim Meserve, a stranger in town who is burning with ambition. Descended from a prominent but now ruined family, he marries Arvay and embarks on a series of careers that reflect Hurston’s beloved Florida’s entry into the modern age – turpentine, orange cultivation, and finally deep-sea fishing. Their retarded son causes Arvay much grief, and seems a penance for her inner struggles with guilt and self-loathing; eventually, as a teenager, he attempts a rape, and is hunted down in the nearby swamp (a symbol of Arvay’s unconscious throughout) and killed. Arvay’s other son, Kenny, acquires musical skills equally from her and their black neighbors, and eventually leaves Florida for a successful career as a jazz musician. The Meserves’ daughter, quite the modern woman, marries a daring real estate tycoon, who sets about draining the swamp for a housing development.

Throughout the novel, Jim learns and profits from the wisdom of his black friends and employees, and tries to deal with his disappointments with Arvay with humor. The bulk of the narrative, however, charts the marital difficulties of the often chauvinist Jim and the moody, moping Arvay. At novel’s end, however, she appears to have worked out many of her problems, and joins Jim in a joyous recreation of their love on the high seas. Despite the somewhat happy ending, the novel offers a case study of self-doubt, and crucially concerns itself with class. Hurston perhaps decided to write about white

characters in order to accomplish these aims, since a white cast freed her from the demands of the “racial” novel. In some ways, the story rehearses the interests of her earlier masterwork, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which ponders the conundrums of not one, but three marriages that the heroine contracts in her ceaseless search for a voice and personal identity. Both novels also lyrically delineate the landscape, climate, and tropical allure of Florida, while mindful of the negative aspects of nature and man’s encounters with it.

Sometimes black writers would try to balance depictions of both white and black communities and central characters. *Beetlecreek* (1950), the first novel by William Demby, was written in Italy, where Demby repatriated, but is set in West Virginia during the Depression. It was an important precursor of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Wright’s last works, in that it expressed a black existentialism. Tracing the interwoven lives of an old, well-meaning white man, Bill Trapp, the black youth Johnny Johnson, and his embittered college-educated uncle David Diggs, the novel focuses on the futile lives of small-town Southern blacks, who all seem to be just as victimized by their roots in their town as by racial oppression. When Trapp, who has previously related positively with blacks while working in a carnival, tries to reach out to the black citizens of Beetlecreek by hosting an interracial picnic, he is falsely accused of being a child molester, which leads to his death after Johnny betrays him to local vigilantes.

Yet another tradition from the past that found a midcentury avatar was the “mulatto novel.” J. Saunders Redding (1906–88) was keenly conscious of the black literary tradition, and in fact wrote one of the most important early histories of black literature, *To Make a Poet Black* (1939). His most important work of fiction, *Stranger and Alone* (1950), drew on his middle-class background; both his parents were graduates of Howard; his father worked for the US Post office in Wilmington, Delaware. After three years of teaching at Morehouse, Redding did graduate work at Brown and then Columbia, which led to his appointment as chair of the English department at Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he wrote his important literary history. A first novel, *No Day of Triumph* (1942), was partly autobiographical, but offered, through the travels of its characters, a sweeping survey of various black Southern Americans as they dealt with the daily trials of segregation.

Redding’s next novel, *Stranger and Alone* was written in Virginia, where he had joined the faculty of Hampton Institute. Its protagonist, Shelton Howden, is an unhappy mulatto whose bitterness is increased when he joins the faculty of Arcadia College and comes under the influence of another frustrated mulatto, the college’s President Perkins Thomas Wimbush, and his twisted

daughter, Gerry, who encourage him to foster his own aims, even when it means betraying the community. Eventually, Howden turns on his black friends, informing on their subversive activities to the white power structure. Ralph Ellison reviewed the book, praising its exposure of the more malignant aspects of the black intelligentsia, but criticizing it for its inadequate narrative devices and symbolism, and lack of Freudian/psychoanalytic theory;⁸ he quite likely drew on Redding's characters for the black college segments of *Invisible Man*. Redding was writing out of personal *and* communal anger, for he had been fired from Morehouse for "radicalism" in 1931, and had done a tour of black colleges in 1940 on a Rockefeller Grant. It seemed vital for returning veterans to secure an education, yet, as Redding saw it, historically black colleges encouraged conformity and mediocrity rather than vital preparation for engaged vocational lives that would help the race; concurrently, many white colleges and universities continued to practice segregation.

A lesser-known novel that in some ways set the stage for James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *The Amen Corner* (1968) was Chancellor Williams's striking religious tale of 1952, *Have You Been to the River?* Williams (1898–1992) had been brought up in rural South Carolina as the son of a former slave. As a child he read black writers avidly and became convinced that a fair history of blacks had yet to be written (Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* would come later). With the support of a local black attorney, the teenage Williams left for Washington, DC, where he graduated from high school and then Howard University. Taking an MA degree there as well, he embarked on a teaching career and a series of government posts. In 1943 he published *The Raven*, a novel about Poe. In 1946 his non-fictional study of racial issues *And If I Were White* appeared. This led to his appointment to the Howard faculty and work on his Ph.D. degree, which was awarded to him from American University in 1949. The dissertation had focused on storefront churches, and this became the subject of *Have You Been to the River?*, the story of Charles Amos David, who founds the Church of the Apostolic Faith and Saints and attracts frenzied adherents, including the "Mother Leader" Liza Jackson, who deserts her husband and destroys her children in her zeal. The story is narrated by a young professor, whose academic perspective provides a necessary and useful tension in the unfolding narrative. The novel also brought together Williams's own rural youth and intellectual, academic maturity.

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), published just two years before the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, was the culmination and confluence of several of these streams of twentieth-century black writing. On the one hand, it encyclopedically

documented virtually every aspect of segregated African American culture, from the rural South of sharecroppers to the urban cosmopolitanism of the "Talented Tenth," from the sheltered world of the rural black college to the politically charged "mean streets" of militantly motivated black alliances, from the comic conventions of rural folk culture to the sophisticated verbal dueling of contemporary black intellectuals and hustlers. The book was also a hybrid literary construct; on the one hand Ellison employed a complex form of literary symbolism that was largely modeled on classics of the American Renaissance such as *Moby-Dick*, "Benito Cereno," Emerson's essays, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Sun Also Rises*; on the other hand, he employed the driving rage, irony, and sometimes surreal gothicism of his black predecessors Jean Toomer, William Attaway, Arna Bontemps, and Richard Wright, along with the folk comedy and satiric traditions of Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, George Schuyler, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes.

The novel is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, both set in a basement hideaway illuminated with 1,369 lights, using filched electricity. From this present "hibernation" site, the anonymous narrator relates the story of his life, from his final days in his hometown to the immediate events in New York City years later that precipitate his flight underground. While this opening and closing is clearly a nod to both Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942), it also relates, although probably unconsciously, to the entire genre of "underground" explorations that began with Dante's *Inferno* and flourished in the nineteenth century after the publication of Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1843). In virtually all variations of this formula, readers are conducted on a tour of dangerous, usually hidden territory, and not all of it underground. Ellison aims to "uncover" – a salient activity of literary modernism – hidden realms for the reader, as he embarks on the encyclopedic mission I have described.

Until the ascendancy of Toni Morrison, Ralph Waldo Ellison was for many years considered the greatest African American writer, based on the initial reception of the only novel he published during his lifetime, *Invisible Man*. A native of Oklahoma City, Ellison was raised by his mother, who worked as a domestic and as a custodian after the death of her husband when Ralph was only three. Like many blacks, his parents had migrated to the Midwest from South Carolina in search of better opportunities. Ellison always had white friends, but also delighted in black folk culture, especially its music, and he became an accomplished trumpet player. A scholarship brought him to Tuskegee Institute, where he majored in music, but also began reading

modern classics, such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A summer job in New York after his junior year ended his college days. After meeting Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and other literary luminaries, he decided to become a sculptor, and studied with the celebrated Richmond Barthé for a year; eventually, however, he set his sights on becoming a writer, particularly after he read André Malraux's *Man's Fate* and Freud's work on dreams. He received strong encouragement when Hughes introduced him to Richard Wright; a subsequent job with the Federal Writers' Project brought him into contact with Sterling Brown. Collecting folklore for the agency provided Ellison with an arsenal of materials for his later fiction. Wright was a strong influence on his work, but his primary literary models were Henry James, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, and Dostoyevsky. Their influences are perhaps most central in the book's impressionistic style, which often verges on the surreal, especially in dream sequences and through stream of consciousness. But these Western "tricks" are complemented by those gleaned from African American culture, particularly black rhetoric, spirituals, folklore, jazz, cosmic religious references from the black pulpit, trickster stories, and, above all, raucous African American humor, often "black" in both ways. Ellison's nervous, protean movements through various stylistic techniques create a perfect equivalent expression for a jarring, confusing, modernist world, one that hurtles around the narrator, without recognizing his humanity.

The title itself plays on the trope of vision, which permeates the book. The blind Homer Barbee, who gives a sermon on the "blackness of blackness" in the early college scenes in the South, echoes Melville's Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*, a book similarly obsessed with vision, white and black symbolism, and the thematic of movement and quest. The presence of hidden blackness is constantly symbolized, especially when the narrator works for Liberty Paints, whose trademark color, "optic white," contains a key element of black. The lack of vision of the "brotherhood" is figured when Brother Jack's eye pops out. Ellison has stated that all his work "is grounded in a concern with the hidden aspects of American history as they come to focus in our racial predicament."⁹

The novel is divided into discrete chapters of the narrator's life. The opening section, "Battle Royal," one of the most highly charged and suggestive passages in American literature, concerns the narrator's participation with nine other black youths in a white men's "smoker" banquet, replete with an almost naked blonde who emerges from a cake. Rising up in an elevator (the narrator, the only intellectual in the group, clearly represents Du Bois's

“Talented Tenth”), the boys find they are to fight each other, blindfolded, on an electrically charged mat. The narrator, however, recites his valedictory speech, and is rewarded with a scholarship to a school very much like Ellison’s own Tuskegee.

The narrator is entrusted with chauffeuring the college’s white patron, Mr. Norton, around the campus, and foolishly accedes to his passenger’s desire to stop at Trueblood’s shack. This farmer, supposedly in a dream-like state, has impregnated his own daughter, and his wife is with child as well. Mr. Norton’s appalled but fascinated reception of the richly embellished tale betrays his own guilty feelings for *his* daughter. The narrator is dismissed by the President for his error (which was compounded by a visit to the chaotic veterans’ infirmary, “The Golden Day”), but is given letters that supposedly will recommend him to New York businessmen. Actually, they damn him, as he eventually learns.

The novel then takes the hero through several workplace experiences, many of them surreal, all of them symbolic of the tortured racial scenarios of a mechanized, urban dystopia. Eventually, he defends an old couple as they are being dispossessed, and winds up in “the brotherhood,” a fictional equivalent of the Communist Party. Brother Jack, a party honcho, winds up betraying the narrator and his friend Todd Clifton; the latter goes mad, and sells dancing Sambo dolls on the street, where police gun him down. This occasions the most impressive of the narrator’s several speeches in the novel, a stirring eulogy. During his brotherhood days, the narrator is assigned to “women’s issues” and becomes sexually involved with predatory white women.

Crossing the demands of his handlers, the narrator, in danger, must disguise himself, and takes on the identity of Rinehart, a pimp, hustler, and minister. He is challenged throughout the last part of the novel by Ras the Exhorter, who mocks the brotherhood and calls on blacks to unite for struggle. Eventually, the narrator throws a spear through Ras’s cheek, as a riot Ras has instigated rages in Harlem. Dodging the police, the narrator falls down a manhole, and thus winds up retreating there from his various identities and problems above ground.

It could be said that by “falling beneath the surface” at this point in his tumultuous career the narrator can only now exercise the penetrating moral “vision” that has concerned him and the other characters throughout the narrative. As Edith Wharton said of her heroine Lilly Bart, it is only when she has fallen behind the tapestry of society that she can see how the threads are interwoven. So too, Wright’s *Man Who Lives Underground* is able to

surreptitiously make sense of things for the first time, when he develops a new perspective. *Invisible Man* is an exemplary work of literary Afro-modernism, because it forces the reader into new modes of seeing, and therefore of understanding; the book's final pronouncement has been made possible by this "education": "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"¹⁰

This new mode of seeing, reading, and perceiving, filtered through a folk-influenced blues aesthetic, also enables the reader to read, as he did, through the newly focused lens of history. In a famous review of *Native Son*, Ellison noted that Southern blacks in Wright's work live in a "pre-individual state induced artificially, like the regression to primitive states noted among cultured inmates of Nazi prisons."¹¹ But he also felt writing emerged from culture, especially music. As he famously remarked, Wright in *Black Boy* evinced a "blues impulse," using it "to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."¹² To their credit, most of the writers between 1945 and 1952 "squeezed" great writing from often tragic but sometimes joyous experience, powerfully assisting the postwar birth of a new age of national expression.

Notes

1. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* [1901] in John Hope Franklin (ed. with Introduction), *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 101.
2. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 196.
3. Ann Petry, *The Street* [1946] (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 229.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
5. Sharon Lynette Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), *passim*.
6. Carla Kaplan (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 467.
7. Gene Andrew Jarrett (ed.), *African American Literature beyond Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 3.
8. Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, p. 249.
9. Robert O'Meally (ed.), *New Essays on Invisible Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 21.
10. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 503.
11. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* [1964] (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 84.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Geographies of the modern: writing beyond borders and boundaries

SABINE BROECK

The trajectory of twentieth-century African American literature in the post-Second World War decades is generally assumed to work something like this: starting with Richard Wright, one will move to Ralph Ellison, maybe linger some on Zora Neale Hurston, hover over the Black Arts Movement and Le Roi Jones/Amiri Baraka, then jump to Alice Walker, and crown the narrative with Toni Morrison. Depending upon particular interest, a few names might be added such as Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Alex Haley, Ishmael Reed, and Nikki Giovanni, for example.¹ Therefore, the wealth and variety of African American writing published on the heels of Richard Wright, and before the creative explosions of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and womanist writing in the 1970s and 1980s, might come as a surprise for some. Since the 1980s there has been a growing market for and greater mainstream scholarly recognition of this sizeable body of work. As early as 1979, Gayl Jones captured the richness she believed to be unique in earlier black literature, calling our attention to its "speech and music continuum. Jazz. Sermon. Incantation. Words as voice heard and music. Whole range of Black speech and music. Ritual. A constant movement and flowing into. Magic song and sound and voice. Constant movement between different kinds of language. Social reality in whole form – history."²

The effort to understand this richness has been a primary function of scholarly reconstruction, although the works themselves have not always reached wide audiences. Works by writers such as William Gardner Smith, Leon Forrest, Carlene Hatcher Polite, Robert Hayden, Albert Murray, Barbara Chase-Riboud and, Bob Kaufman, and the jazz manifestos of Ted Joans and Xam Wilson Cartier, provide us with a clear sense of the expanded range of African American writing within a relatively short span of time. These writers moved beyond the boundaries of what mainstream audiences, African American and white, considered an emerging canon of black writing.

Even before the peak of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-sixties, before the dissemination of African American culture and history to black and white Americans in Black Studies classes throughout the nation, a plethora of exploratory texts had begun to make their mark. No one aesthetic school or leitmotif is sufficient to explain the majority of these texts; neither do they fit into the accepted interpretations of what it means to write the African American cultural text into literary history. If anything, they can be understood as depictions of the ways in which African Americans tried to make sense of a changing and contradictory world. The works confront the disillusionment that followed the betrayal by the US government that needed black men to fight the war against Hitler, even while it maintained shameless forms of racist discrimination at home. With the entry of African Americans into the US system of mainstream (i.e. white) higher education in greater numbers than ever before, black writing after the Second World War became a testing ground – sometimes a battlefield – for possible representation of the range, both the potential and the boundaries, of black existence in the USA and internationally. Increasingly, it became a space for the development of a distinctive epistemology, for historical and cultural reconstruction, and for avant-garde aesthetics, even if this meant a delay in academic respectability and mass acceptance. As varied as this outpouring of cultural production was, its characteristics were remarkable for the energy displayed in crossover strategies: between distinct literary genres, between music and literature, between “high” and “low” culture, and between writing in the land of one’s birth and in one’s chosen nation of exile.

Many of the avant-garde writers who experienced praise or indifference received neglect or scorn for the very same thing. Oftentimes, the controversy their works aroused focused on the issue central to a generation preoccupied with certain tenets of black cultural nationalism, especially the creation of an ‘authentic’ black expression. Too often, critical judgment was based on the degree to which a work subscribed to a particular view of race consciousness. While, on the one hand, this enabled uncompromising, anti-racist, and iconoclastic prose and poetry, on the other hand it silenced or ostracized any artistic utterance that questioned the prevailing standards for gender, sexual difference, black identity, or political orientation. Not surprisingly, a response for many writers who saw themselves as outsiders was exile, because they refused to accept either their contradictory status as black Americans or, a few years later, the powerful impact of the cultural nationalist agenda.

As one of several expatriates following Wright’s example, William Gardner Smith (1927–74) was marked early as a literary outsider, and his novels

continue to receive scant attention. Trained as a journalist, Smith was a soldier in the US Army during the Second World War and a member of the African American troops who stayed on as occupation forces in Berlin after Germany's liberation. In 1948, he published his first novel, *Last of the Conquerors*, set after the war. In it Smith explores the lives of black GIs, who were among the first to become aware of the mobilizing potential of their contradictory status as US citizens when they began to press for improvements within the army. Indeed, they found themselves in another war against the debilitating effects of discrimination and abuse: facing a new form of "Jim Crow." Smith's novel propels its protagonist, on the wings of war as it were, into a global range of conflict lines, providing readers with unique insights into widespread racism at home and abroad. Far from being a peripheral text that takes place at the margins of the "major" concerns about race, the crossover impetus and plot of *Last of the Conquerors* deliberately pose crucial questions with regard to race and gender, to national belonging, and to an international struggle for human rights which should be central to African American concerns. Moreover, the book adds significantly to and provides an important perspective on the growing body of literature of the Second World War.

Last of the Conquerors tells the story of the quasi-dishonorable discharge of a large group of soldiers from the Negro battalion. The protagonist, twenty-two-year-old Hayes Dawkins, is a GI stationed in postwar Berlin with the US peace-keeping forces, just as Smith himself was. When a fellow GI and close friend, driven by his outrage at racist acts on the barrack grounds, murders a white superior, this sets off a series of shocking events, allowing Smith to unravel the complexities of race as a transatlantic phenomenon. Dawkins is implicated in his fellow soldiers' resistance against racist actions aimed at them, is forced to resign, and loses his postwar privileges. All of this is placed against a backdrop of sex and easy companionship with German women, and of the tension between American racism and the apparent acceptance of GI's among the German people. Dawkins himself at first displays a naive enthusiasm; his later evolution into a principled skeptic with guarded mistrust for others frames his relationship with German girlfriend Ilse. Dawkins and Ilse must endure overt racial abuse when they make their relationship public, and the German politeness they have misunderstood all but disappears. While Smith is unable to offer a critique of the protagonist's decidedly patriarchal and sexist behavior, the novel accomplishes a kind of double-crossing. Dawkins's African American pride and race consciousness enable him to sharply criticize inner-American ambivalences around race and to learn to read most of the German politeness as bigotry. This perceptiveness, however,

stands in contrast to the novel's sexual politics. Dawkins's rather patriarchal views on women – and on the white Ilse as a rather submissively portrayed woman in particular – do not allow him to address her as an equal. Even though he understands and cherishes her commitment to him as a black man, which might put her and her family's reputation, if not their lives and well-being, in jeopardy with other Germans, it is not only his appropriate expectation of the US as an aggressively racist environment which will not permit an interracial relationship to be lived out in peace, but also his male prerogative of keeping his independence from Ilse's female future-bound fantasies which compels him to leave her behind upon his return to the USA. It is this inability to chart the novel's implicit and immediately visible gendered conflict lines as poignantly as the racialized ones which restricts the novel's aesthetic and political power. This, however, does not justify the critical neglect of the text over the last decades. Being one of the very few fictional texts to go beyond the center of African American life to explore the potential, and the limits, of individual and collective crossover relations of black diasporic circumstances beyond a US cosmos, the novel invites us to rethink questions of race and gender precisely from its peripheral vantage point of embattled interracial love, even if that means to think beyond the protagonist's limitations.

Conceivably, Smith's decision to shift away from an American center of cultural production may not have helped gain him much attention for the novel. His black male protagonist is placed outside the impoverished black ghetto – abroad in a fairly comfortable position in Germany – in a post Richard Wright era. Dawkins exists on the social and cultural margins of black maleness by relating to a German woman, something that would not anchor the novel in a Black Studies repertory when many of these texts began to resurface in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The German genocide of European Jewry looms in the novel's background, as it were, overshadowing the relations between the US forces, its black soldiers in particular, and the Germans with whom they interact. The African Americans' attempts to enjoy the friendly and comparatively respectful treatment at the hands of many Germans are always waylaid at the point when the black men discover that far from self-reflectively taking responsibility for the Shoah, or at least feeling ashamed, the Germans seem to see no contradiction between a post-fascist attachment to Hitler and the old system and their quasi-kindness toward the black soldiers; it is their anti-Americanism, using white discrimination against black people as a convenient occasion, which propels them, not a genuine anti-racist attitude. The novel,

however, never foregrounds this political dynamic. It never forces the black men into a confrontation with Germans during which they would have to take sides against that dubious companionship, to align themselves with the Holocaust victims openly. The challenge, thus, to rethink the political racist and anti-racist transatlantic dynamics of the postwar years remained only implicit in the novel, and fell prey, like the novel's interracial perspective, to the more sharply focused attention on the black and white conflict more familiar to an American critical reading public in the decades after its publication. Both the connection between race and gender in the international struggle for human rights and the focus on interracial sexual relationships in the years following the war were perhaps too much too soon for American readers. Treating the subject of severely tabooed topics in US society was hardly a prescription for success in the period.

It is worth noting that New Criticism, the literary arm of a political and cultural conservatism, had already become entrenched in the American academy, and writers and artists who were progressive, who might have identified at least intellectually with a cultural Left harking back to the 1930s, found themselves isolated. No doubt, Cold War hysteria, and McCarthyism had encouraged conservative reading tastes. New Criticism and its distinct bias against socially engaged writing supported artistic autonomy, most commonly understood as a belief in art for art's sake. This helps to explain why the generation of radical young black intellectuals who reached maturity in the sixties immediately began to take militant issue with what they regarded as the ivory tower literary tastes and aesthetics of their predecessors. Their attention, however, was not extended to writers, like Smith, whose works, in their view, moved merely on the margins of a militant black agenda.

Smith's accomplishments, however, are all the more impressive when we consider the three additional novels he published before dying of cancer at forty-seven. Again, he engages in a double-crossing: writing from Paris, Smith sets *Anger at Innocence* (1950) in his native Philadelphia, presenting us with a white coming-of-age story. Given the cool critical reception of other writers who had experimented with "white" texts – Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953), Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), and Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954) – it was not surprising that the novel received almost no reviews. Alain Locke described it as a "story of low life in slum areas ... melodrama, superficial stock characterization, banality and cliché ... a severe disappointment."³ Despite their best efforts, black writers could only expect to be considered barely adequate when approaching white material. The exception, which Locke also noted, was Frank Yerby (1916–91), who had established

himself early as a primary crossover black writer “whose mass production of best sellers denotes the coquet of the general market and of the general theme, for whatever that may be worth,” adding that “Mr. Yerby may yet return to the place of the literary novel and the fold of the serious fictionists of Negro life and experience.”⁴ Yerby, of course, never did.

Smith, however, did return to a focus on the African American experience with *South Street* (1954), *The Stone Face* (1963), and a final novel *Return to Black America* (1970), which were more favored than his earlier works. Clearly Smith used his fiction to map his own development as an American GI who, by remaining abroad, tried to locate his experiences and attach them to larger historical and cultural events, as, for example, the French racism against Algerians in Paris in *The Stone Face*. Each of these novels takes one more step toward an acceptance of American-ness after the expatriate experience. Serving as a bridge between Richard Wright and the Black Arts Movement, Smith was concerned to document the feelings, impressions, and experiences of black life, keenly aware of his condition as an African American by virtue of his active involvement with the black expatriate community in Paris. Smith distinguished himself as a “champion of basic human issues, dignity, relative security, freedom and the end of savagery between human beings”; sadly, he died before reaching old age.⁵

What seems to have limited the dissemination and canonization of Smith’s text, the absence of readers willing to transgress their own set of prerogatives, their own range of cultural and social experience, in order to appreciate challenging questions, becomes an even more severe hindrance for the public acceptance of Carlene Hatcher Polite’s two novels, *The Flagellants* (1967) and *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* (1975). Reviewed with critical acclaim, *The Flagellants* never found a wider readership even in the radical feminist and leftist academic climate of the early 1970s. Long before the critical success of Alice Walker and other womanist authors, Polite raised questions that black feminism would not address until decades later; however, she did so in an idiom that did not easily feed readers’ hunger for gender identification, emotional connection, intellectual stimulation, and mental comfort. *The Flagellants* is an exemplary, avant-garde text, an instance of radical politics and African American feminist signifying. It introduced aesthetic features of postmodernism that remained opaque to a female readership eager for dramatic and narrative connection, spiritual exhortation, and moral uplift.

The novel’s plot concerns itself with the rather violent, mutually abusive love affair between the protagonist, ironically named Ideal, and her antagonist, Jimson. Ideal, who is described as having had a “self-destroying root”

planted at the bottom of her own former "poor child's free heart," gives up an unsatisfying, middle-class marriage to move in with Jimson, whom she sees as the fulfillment of her sexual and emotional desires: the answer to female longing for intellectual equality and mutual erotic pleasure.⁶

However, in a mode of obsessively intense narration, Polite has her female protagonist undergo a marathon-like series of cruel, sexually charged confrontations with Jimson, in which those expectations turn out to be romantic illusions. The characters engage in mutual flagellation, in bouts of constant and possessive mental torture. Polite's text alternates between realism and grotesque satire, as the two protagonists paradoxically keep joining in unreconciled sexual battle. When Jimson takes a well-paying job, Ideal suspects him of having an affair with his white superior. Her vindication is cut short when she goes out with one of Jimson's friends, hoping to get back at him, only to be nearly raped. This instance does not change their relationship for the better, however. The novel ends without closure, aptly, on a note of flagellation. Says Ideal: "If I were a man, Jimson, I would give you the beating that you desire. This is your thrill, your kick. You would like a man to beat you down, especially a white one." And Jimson's answer knows no mercy, either; he puts Ideal down for her independence, only to declare his desire for her as the victim of his violent attitude: "And some women accept me just as I am. They don't try to make me over, play the matriarch. They encourage me, answer 'Yes' to everything. It is easier that way ... One of these days all you colored women will wake up to this fact; then you will keep your men ... And now that I have caused you suffering equal to mine, and you still love me, I want you, Ideal."⁷

The novel, a critique of male privilege and sexist distortions of human relations, bears a resemblance to avant-garde black feminist statements like those found in Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* (1970). However, as its title aptly promises, rather than detail an emotionally and intellectually promising romantic relationship, the novel offers a persistent round of violations between Jimson and Ideal, whose power struggle is enacted in and through their mutual tirades without anyone ever coming out as a winner. Almost barbarously, fed by drink and drugs, the two characters hurl sexualized and stereotypical insults at each other, sometimes dressed up with existentialist grandeur. With its almost torturous patience, with its extensive and expansive use of invectives, and its piled up rancid accusations between Ideal and Jimson, the text chronicles the acts of verbal and physical transgression between the two characters. What mainly happens in the text is indeed mental flagellation, not only on the plot level between

Ideal and Jimson, but also on the part of the text vis-à-vis its readership. The text stubbornly refuses any kind of solution or redemption. At no point is there an explanation of why these two people remain obsessively hooked into each other. However, at the end, Ideal leaves Jimson to his own narcissistic bohemian antics and preserves what is left of her self-respect. "Let me be alone," she announces.⁸ This ending, though, remains ironic because the protagonists did send each other off in the course of their flagellations before. According to some feminist standards, based on a literary mode of social realism in the 1970s, this text was way over the limit of bearable female masochism. However, one should read the novel as a pioneering critique of intramural gender relations in which male egotistic notions of authority conjoin with acts of female submission. In these instances, a woman could either endure or go crazy, unleashing her fury on the man who wanted her moral and emotional resilience and resourcefulness, but would not allow for a mutually respectful partnership between equals to develop.

What keeps the novel from what might appear as pure melodrama is its discernment, its extremely hermetic and resistant prose, its almost claustrophobic settings, and its refusal of organic narrative structure. Moreover, the author shrewdly crosses the genre expectations that her plot conjures up by way of postmodern aesthetic strategies. At many points, the text aggressively surpasses the realist frame it has set up, veering into the surreal and into existentialist absurdity. Polite obviously plays with a set of well-established staples of African American writing: the Southern heritage, the ghetto scenes in New York, and the 'going to meet the man' rhetoric, for example, in order to question the validity of realism to represent her characters' lives and struggles. The novel's moral and intellectual as well as mental range, its aggressive scepticism of the political rhetoric of its historical moment, and its obvious indebtedness to European-based philosophies, revealed in its demanding tirades, may have placed *The Flagellants* beyond the audience it was seeking to attract, since Polite borrowed little from the nationalist rhetoric of the late 1960s.

Poets were similarly castigated when they moved beyond the structures and ideas of the Black Arts Movement, a fuller discussion of which can be found in Chapter 13. Yet it is also true that many of the poets writing in the sixties were mobilized by the period's possibilities for utopian performative exuberance, its massive and operational sense of creative possibility, and its infectious sense of social and political imperatives, especially its "art for the people." At no other historical moment has artistic expression gone so consistently beyond academia. The downside of this collective outburst of energy, as with similar movements, was its propensity to create a core demand for

political correctness, and thus, in its own criticism and standard-setting agendas, to make prescriptive claims on literary and artistic production.

The work of poet Robert Hayden (1913–80), and the reactions to it, thus invite a productive reconsideration of the sometimes skewed balance between the advances of a strong African American “black consciousness” movement, on the one hand, and the crippling effects of what could be aesthetically naive and narrow cultural politics, on the other. Hayden’s epic poem “Middle Passage” shows a restlessly meticulous writer who kept rewriting and revising his own poems. In the case of “Middle Passage,” there exist four versions. The earliest was published in *Phylon* (1941), another in *Cross Section* (1945), and a third in *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) where “Middle Passage” is joined by “Daedalus,” “The Ballad of Nat Turner,” and “Runagate, Runagate,” Hayden’s poetic reconstruction of African American endurance and resistance. It made its final appearance in Hayden’s *Selected Poems* (1966).

“Middle Passage” is a culmination for Hayden, who studied under W. H. Auden, and began his literary apprenticeship with the Federal Writers’ Project between 1936 and 1938. Hayden’s work, as in “The Black Spear,” a response to Stephen Vincent Benét’s Civil War poem “John Brown’s Body,” shows his experiments with the epic form. In “Middle Passage,” he achieved a voice fully sophisticated, multilayered, collective, and ironic. It was Hayden who first introduced the term “Middle Passage” for literary exploration as he sought to reconstruct this traumatic experience at the heart of American history. The poem captures the spirit of transatlantic voyage as it charts the slavetrading journey, skillfully juxtaposing the voices of the enslaved Africans with those of the white traders and seamen, a technique that would be adapted decades later by Caryl Phillips, among others, in his novel *Crossing the River* (1994). “Middle Passage” relies upon an emphatic narrative consciousness established by the repeated line “Voyage through death to life upon these shores.”⁹ Hayden also evokes a familiar African American cultural pattern: ships ironically named “Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy” call out, demanding a response, offered in the subsequent lines:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks follow the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.¹⁰

This evocation of horror, indeed, knows no mercy. The next mention of the ships’ names follows on the heels of laconic, pitiless observations from a captain’s log book:

10 April 1800

Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.¹¹

Hayden integrates bits and pieces of language from the most diverse registers in an effort to represent a horror as unspeakable as the trading in human flesh: fragments of black spirituals, a seaman's diary, ironic reminiscences of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a slave trader's gleeful recollections, snippets from a bigot's white prayers, and excerpts of minutes from the Amistad trial. The words linger hauntingly with the reader as a reminder of the human callousness of slavery's profiteers. The poet's ethical opposition to and philosophical critique of slavery and the slave trade and its importance in the formation of modern transatlantic societies shines in the repeated insertions of the narrative voice proper:

But oh, the living look at you with human eyes whose suffering
accuses you, whose hatred reaches through the swill of dark
to strike you like a leper's claw.
You cannot stare that hatred down
... cannot kill the deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will.¹²

Ostentatiously addressed to a slave ship's captain and crew, these lines are a far-reaching condemnation of a society that demands, permits, needs, and supports the possession of human souls, in this case trafficked from Africa. Single-handedly, and without the benefit of years of Black Studies research that would follow, without years of public debates about the scandalous absence and suppression of slavery and the slave trade in American collective memory, "Middle Passage" interrupts the national amnesia about the slavery trade in ways that obviously prefigure the novels, poems, and plays that subsequently appeared, primarily after the 1980s. Almost all of the master tropes of the later artistic recreation of the trade's atrocities are assembled here.

Hayden consistently refused, in his public utterances and in his work, to be confined by labels like "Negro poet"; or to limit his aesthetics to the demand that all art should reflect and support the tenets of the Black Revolution at the time. When a younger group of artists convened at the First Black Writers' Conference at Nashville's Fisk University in 1966, Hayden, along with his groundbreaking text, was criticized as a traitor to his entire race. The irony is that Hayden had received, a few days before the Fisk conference, the Grand Prix for *A Ballad of Remembrance* from the Third World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar; this, however, did not impress a younger generation of writers and

students committed to particular radically “black” forms and contents of artistic expression. Looking back on this ostracism helps to explain why his poetry originally lacked a context for drawing attention to its pioneering exclusivity, and has remained until recently an insider’s treasure, known only by a few cohorts of students and scholars who read his work in the early 1980s. Its prominent availability as electronic text on the world wide web today signals critical acts of redirection, and readerly recuperation. This, along with a growing body of criticism, situates Hayden’s work squarely in the African American as well as mainstream literary traditions. More recent criticism, trained in postmodern theories, comments on features of his poetry that attract a more sophisticated readership who have learned to appreciate Hayden’s work without having to make moralistic judgments on the choices made by artists who do not flag traditional notions of blackness in every utterance. Hayden never renounced the influence of white poets like Eliot and Auden in his work. Quite the contrary, he tried to shape and bend aesthetic finesse in order to name and represent challenges to historical memory and contemporary consciousness as radical and disturbing in their own right as Nikki Giovanni’s poetry was with her often quoted line “Nigger can you kill.” The formalist aesthetic influence of T. S. Eliot’s pioneering modernism is visible in Hayden’s refusal of militant rhetoric for his own work: he insisted on the necessity of keeping all shades and nuances of literary language in circulation. Moreover, by explicitly fusing what was viewed as a “white aesthetic” with his own understanding of African American cultural perspectives and literary idioms, he acknowledged the impossibility of aesthetic separatism that was hotly contested in subsequent canon debates.

The refusal to surrender to two cultural monoliths, one black, one white, poised and posing against each other in the anti-racist social struggle, is a feature Hayden shared with another multitalented artist and controversial intellectual of the period, Albert Murray. While Hayden aptly called the Americans “this baffling multi people” of “varied pigmentations white black red brown yellow,”¹³ Murray coined the phrase “Omni-Americans,” the title he gave his provocative and lucid collection of essays first published in 1970. His observations focus on the aesthetic contributions African Americans have made to American culture as a whole, and thereby have mixed it up in impressive ways:

When such improvisation as typifies Negro music, dance, religion, sports, fashions, general bearing and deportment, and even food preparation is considered from the negro point of view, there is seldom, if ever, any serious doubt about how negroes feel about themselves or about what they accept or reject of white people. They regard themselves not as sub-standard, abnormal

non-white people of American social science surveys and the news media, but rather as if they were, so to speak, fundamental *extensions* of contemporary possibilities ... what makes man human is style. Hence the crucial significance of art in the study of human behavior: All human effort beyond the lowest level of the struggle for animal subsistence is motivated by the need to live in style ... the same basic improvisational stylization (with its special but unmistakable overtones of what Johan Huizinga, discussing man as *homo ludens*, refers to as the play element in all cultures) applies to positive as well as to negative situations.¹⁴

The Omni-Americans (1970) works as a “counter-statement,” as Murray himself called it, to the “race-oriented propagandists, whether white or Black [who] would have things be otherwise. But the United States is in actuality not a nation of Black people and white people. It is nation of multicolored people.”¹⁵ For Murray, ethnic differences, even though they intrude “on areas where they do not belong,” are the “very essence of cultural diversity and national creativity.”¹⁶ The target of his repeated polemics “is the professional observer/reporter who relies on the so-called findings and all-too-inclusive extrapolations of social science survey technicians for their sense of the world.”¹⁷ Murray deconstructs American culture with great, if always ironically employed fervor. His aim is to surpass what has often been referred to as the “black life is misery” school of African American protest writing and politics of his generation and to call for

a brief for the affirmative ... After all, someone must at least begin to try to do justice to what U.S. Negroes *like* about being Black and to what they *like* about being *Americans*. Otherwise, justice can hardly be done to the incontestable fact that not only do they choose to live rather than commit suicide, but that, poverty and injustice notwithstanding, far from simply struggling in despair, they live with gusto and a sense of elegance that has always been downright enviable.¹⁸

True to that credo, his own writing articulates black life in the United States as a fountain of musical, spiritual, intellectual, and physical creativity. Particularly rich is his writing about black music, which becomes emblematic in his fiction. Most notable stylistically is Murray’s characteristic *jazziness*, his use of those techniques like riffs, breaks, repetitions, rhythms, solos, and call-and response patterned passages choreographed with irresistible swing. His novels and essays display some of the most sophisticated and provocative prose of the period. His formal elegance, combined with an iconoclastic independence of thought, prevented a critical reception both from a narrow black nationalist point of view, for whom Murray’s miscegenation of aesthetic

and cultural canons disturbed political purity, as well as from a later post-structurally oriented theoretical perspective for whom Murray, paradoxically, was too politically engaged and straightforward.

For Murray, this quintessentially American miscegenated aesthetic dates back to the entry of enslaved Africans into the New World and the pragmatic syncretism of cultures of the racialized and diverse contact zone born of slavery. Murray, who considers black culture as American as apple pie, notes the existence of a “blues aesthetic” even before there was a word for it. For him this aesthetic is related neither to economic deprivation nor to political, social, and cultural discrimination; nor does it owe itself to pure retentions of “Africanness.” Nor does his register include any romanticized pining for a mythical Mother Africa, or any other essentialized notions of blackness as a mental or psychic property. To him, as both his essays and his novels reveal, it is all about a cultural repertoire of modes, features, techniques and gestures of communication, expressions and imaginings, in other words about a particular style of life and a particular aesthetic. Murray was thus able to maintain an articulate distance from the more polarizing politics of the sixties, refusing to allow that African American culture remain subjected to, and contained in, the documentary statistics of black ghetto life which gained such prominence in the work of Gunnar Myrdal and others. This position – against the tide of popular opinion at the time – has nonetheless gained him considerable attention and affection in more recent years.

Murray’s particular strength lies in his essayistic voice. It serves as an indispensable bridge between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, between Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, between James Baldwin and Cornel West or bell hooks, as well as between the vernacular and postmodern traditions, between jazz and writing, and between politics and poetry. The essay, therefore, is one more way in which black writing accomplishes various border crossings, since Murray, like James Baldwin, not only expanded the range of things “see-able,” and “say-able,” but also the aesthetics of the genre, by bringing the vernacular and academically formal together.

Murray, like Ralph Ellison, believed that black expressive culture provided a vernacular base upon which a distinct literary tradition could be built. This becomes manifest in his own essays, but also in his four semi-autobiographical novels: *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), *The Spyglass Tree* (1991), *The Seven League Boots* (1995), and *The Magic Keys* (2005). In those works, Murray skillfully interweaves black Southern vernacular with literary patterns embedded in the Eurocentric tradition. The novels trace the life and times of the protagonist Scooter in the 1920s and 1930s from Gasoline Point, a hamlet in the Deep

South; back to an imaginary Alabama college, by way of New York University and the streets and joints of Harlem. *Train Whistle Guitar* introduces Scooter by telling the story of his childhood in the Deep South of the 1920s. In *The Spyglass Tree* the reader follows Murray's blues man and budding intellectual protagonist to a black college (reminiscent of Tuskegee) in the 1930s. *The Seven League Boots* recounts Scooter's experiences as a bass player in a touring jazz band following his graduation from college. *The Magic Key* has a more mature protagonist come back to Alabama, after having enjoyed a vibrant university life in New York in the 1940s. All four novels beam with Murray's characteristic, barely disguised cameo experiences of intellectual and artistic celebrities, mentors, friends, and colleagues of the day, including Romare Bearden, Count Basie, Ralph Ellison, Duke Ellington, and others.

Scooter is a veritable blues artist, dapper conman/picaro crossbreed who, despite the racism surrounding him in larger society of his time, never questions his own humanity. Instead he manages to affirm his self in his rather hip but quotidian and non-dramatic pursuits, like playing in an Ellington-style band, dating a movie star, visiting Europe, or going to graduate school. That the protagonist's anti-heroic travels and adventures land him in the position of writing a biography for one of his mentors, a tap dancer by a variety of names – "Royal highness," "Kid Stomp the Royal High Stepper," and "Kid Royal King of the Stompers" – eloquently sums up Murray's preoccupations. Moreover, it is a more than apt figuration of Murray's philosophy, since his preference is to "stomp" the blues, to dance around it, rather than trying to smash it violently.

James Baldwin (1924–87), too, was one of those prolific intellectuals who became household names in their time, but who claim little attention in current literary criticism. Baldwin, like Murray, found the essay a medium in which he could combine the personal and the political to provide an outspoken and radical critique of the impact of racism on the human psyche. In the fifties and sixties, his essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) made him accessible to larger audiences. Baldwin's work has been considered by many critics a peculiar mixture of the sublime and the trivial. He brought the American insider's story of oppression by race and class together with the outsider's perspective, gained by writing in and from Europe. Baldwin explores the intense pain and joy felt in hetero- and homosexual human attachments and love relationships, of white and black entanglements, in the history and the contemporary discourses and practices of racism. Even though he garnered the enthusiastic support of his contemporary literati, and became an articulate spokesperson for the experience of

American racism in the 1960s, he was not “straight” enough to have his work loved and remembered non-controversially. As Quentin Miller observes in his *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, the reception history of Baldwin’s work has thus been characterized by glaring absences and decisive omissions.¹⁹

Giovanni’s Room (1956), the first openly gay novel by an African American writer, is a pioneering exploration of the border-crossing phenomenon that is this chapter’s focus. In the novel, written during his sojourn in Paris, Baldwin shifts his attention away from the black experience per se. The novel considers issues of racial and sexual identity in a complex portrait of a homosexual community. Autobiographically inspired, the novel deals with a crisis of sexual identity, which allows Baldwin to address an issue which few American writers had ever been bold enough to confront in fiction. Given his knowledge about the extent of homophobia in the African American community, Baldwin’s decision to move his representation of the gay experience to another country, and displace it to the sexual contact between Americans and Europeans, offered him both textual and social freedom necessary for this exploration.

Baldwin’s novel of the late 1960s, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) captures like a prism all the contradictions, which surrounded and sometimes engulfed him as a writer and frequently his characters. It spoke directly to the African American community’s upwardly mobile members: its artists, actors, political spokespeople, and intellectuals, as well as to the benevolent but ultimately unreconstructed white liberals and leftists who were willing to enter into social, cultural, and political alliances. The novel introduces actor Leo Proudhammer at a moment of high crisis. Forced to rest in the hospital to recover from a severe heart attack, he is able to step back from his own life and review its crucial moments of becoming and desperation. Echoing themes, motifs, and the spiritual sound of Baldwin’s first and most successful novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Proudhammer chronicles his childhood in Harlem, the harrowed but intense relations with his father and mother, and most importantly with his older brother Caleb. As an African American version of the *Künstlerroman*, the novel represents an artist’s coming of age. It takes us through the obligatory stations of success, challenges, and difficulties into what Baldwin might have called the terrible freedom of an outsider’s life. Readers learn about Leo’s first efforts at becoming an actor, the indispensable negotiations with the white liberal world of theatre, his life-long love for his white actress colleague Barbara, and his liaison with Christopher, a much younger black revolutionary who appears

to represent the reincarnation of his brother Caleb. As with other works in Baldwin's canon, *Tell Me* becomes a subtle canvas of human relations and contradictions; there are no clear lines of guilt and heroism, of shame and righteousness drawn a priori. The novel does not adhere to the conventions of 1960s rhetoric; rather it probes the characters' interior worlds in Baldwin's signature language of a deeply felt, if anguished humanism. Baldwin's oeuvre as a whole – the novels, plays, short stories, poems, and essays – should be considered as an articulation of an African American ethics, and as such he is the direct ancestor to Toni Morrison. His primary interest was to find a way to write spirituality into the literary text, without looking for comfort in orthodoxy. Baldwin strove for humanism from the point of the disadvantaged and those socially marginalized; without resorting to cheap militant kitsch, he embraced sincere emotion and refused to succumb to cynicism. He left to subsequent generations a legacy of sometimes tortuous but always beautiful explorations of human love and hatred in all their inherent ambiguities. Even though his novels' plots sometimes veered into the trivially foreseeable, and teetered on the brink of the speculative and sensational, as in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), his probing narrative voice consistently fought for spiritual sincerity, which made his texts at times hard to bear for judicious secular audiences.

This quality of the attached rather than detached voice appears even more convincingly in his short stories. One of Baldwin's most chilling works, "Going to Meet the Man," the title story for his 1965 collection, dissects the practice of lynching by having it recounted from the point of view of a white man sexually aroused by his murderous action. Owning his own history as a young preacher, Baldwin never deigned to speak as the disinvested, disinterested intellectual, thus prefiguring Cornel West's emphatic tone and gesture. Moreover, his choice of subject matter was irresistibly idiosyncratic; he wrote courageously about anti-Semitism, the Jewish community, interracial relations, gender roles, sexuality, African Americans and Africans, black people's experiences abroad, the history of racism, and whiteness as a moral challenge, always struggling to make tangible, intellectually and emotionally, the *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), as in the title of his last essay collection. Baldwin never saw any contradiction between addressing racialized particularity on the one hand, and talking in the entire nation's interest on the other. No writer before him was able to delineate the entanglement of racism, homophobia, gender hierarchies, and class oppression in their American and international permutations with such visual precision and haunting clarity.

For Baldwin and William Gardner Smith, exile allowed a certain freedom of perspective, if not a considerable measure of success. For Barbara Chase-Riboud, the move to Paris reflected a path often taken by visual artists. Several generations of black artists, beginning in the nineteenth century with Henry Ossawa Turner (1859–1937), had looked to Paris as a place to further their craft and gain recognition in an environment free from the prescriptions of race. Before she began to write fiction, Chase-Riboud had become widely recognized as a sculptor, with exhibitions in leading museums and art galleries around the world. While she continued to paint and to sculpt, Chase-Riboud became interested in the tale of a woman slave who had been owned by her lover, an American president. That tale became the bestseller *Sally Hemings* (1979), a novel that would shake the self-righteous foundations of US white popular opinion. The controversial text, while fictionally enriched, is, as Chase-Riboud argued, based on the historically accurate account of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, who lived and had children together in Monticello, following the death of Jefferson's wife. The novel was quick to attract accusations of slander, its version of history considered mere invention. DNA tests in the late 1990s eventually established the factual truth of the novelist's tale and the birthright of the Hemings descendants, opening up a wider debate about white dominance, the truth of miscegenation, and America's historical amnesia than its author – or anyone for that matter – could ever have anticipated.

Chase-Riboud continued to investigate little acknowledged facts about black and world history in her *Echo of Lions* (1989), about Cinque, the hero of the Amistad rebellion. Her well-known suit against Steven Spielberg, in which she accused him of plagiarizing her novel's material for his *Amistad* film, backfired; not only did she lose, but she was also accused of plagiarizing material for her own novel without acknowledgment. These moments in her artistic biography have made her a cause célèbre, as well as an object of public controversy. What is, however, much more interesting in the context of literary history than the relationship between fact and fiction and the subsequent court proceedings is the artistic and political vision expressed in Chase-Riboud's oeuvre. On the heels of *Sally Hemings* she published a series of historical novels which all center on a reconstruction of the importance of slavery to modern Western history. Her particular mode of selecting historical scenarios and protagonists has an obvious appeal for popular audiences: Sally Hemings and her daughter in *The President's Daughter* (1994), the African chief and rebel in *Cinque*, the French-American creole-turned-white-slave-turned-Turkish-sultana in *Valide: A Novel of the Harem* (1986), or Sarah Baartman in

Hottentot Venus (2003). Chase-Riboud underlays her romances with sharp political questioning and soul-stirring insights, surpassing the mold of the historical novel as nationalistic repository. Her suggestive theses always come at the reader from some unexpected angle, as for example in *Sally Hemings*, where she seems to imply that the illicit relationship with Jefferson allowed the enslaved black woman a kind of irresistible, if subterranean mastery; or in *Valide*, when the author seduces the reader to identify with the female ex-white slave turned feudal master and her self-realization by way of the sexual possession of her son's soldier friend. Chase-Riboud does not shy away from the use of genre fiction: plot-driven suspense and readability for many. Yet the philosophy behind her textual strategies is more sophisticated upon closer examination. Several crucial and related questions serve as impetus for her work. What does it do to a society, and to its individual members, if human beings want to, or think they need to, possess other human beings, whether materially, sexually, spiritually, or mentally? How much possessive impetus is there in love, and when does human desire turn into tyranny of the other self? How are these questions inflected by structures of racialized, gendered, and classed hegemony? In what sense has the naturalization of sexual and racial purity, that legalization of a fantasy of dominance in the taboo of miscegenation, enabled the persistence of racial hierarchies, a rift active in Western societies long after the abolition of legal slavery? Her novels read like a literary tapestry exploring these issues. Far from being an exile's disadvantage, Chase-Riboud's position as a writer abroad, paired with her cosmopolitan intelligence, has enabled her to go beyond parochial national confines of her subject matter, and to express sophisticated judgment against all acts of enslavement.

In light of more recent postcolonial and African American cultural studies theory, Chase-Riboud's works might be considered examples of the worldliness and far-reaching scope of black diasporic production, whether or not this was duly noticed by her most ardent critics. Her range of subject matter – ranging beyond a national framework, and beyond a cast of “proper” African American characters – places her in good company with post-1960s pioneering African American scholarship. In 1979, Melvin Dixon had laid out in *Chant of Saints* a blueprint of diasporic connections across the USA, Africa, and Europe, making far-reaching assumptions about the international framework of black writing which would be taken up a scholarly generation later. Dixon had conceived of black writing without borders: “They [the black writers from the USA, Africa, and the Caribbean] changed the course of modern literature by demanding that the African voice be heard.”²⁰ Echoing that assumption, all of

Chase-Riboud's novels, if taken together as a complex continuum, articulate a devastating critique of global modernity's cultures as mired in and complicit with slave trading and slavery, as well as a philosophical deconstruction of the human desire for control, ownership, and possession. Moreover, at the heart of her analysis of possession and oppression she places globally active social and cultural patterns of gender/race relations, which base their logic on an equation of the slave with the feminine – and with 'niggered' by the very fact of enslavement, whatever the actual gender or race of a particular enslaved person may be. If turned around as an insight into and claim to resistance, this conceptualization arrives at a perception Toni Morrison famously formulated by naming black women the forerunners of modern world experience. Chase-Riboud's analysis thus reaches far beyond the celebrated but also trivialized bestseller status of any of her individual novels; it provides philosophical critique in the form of very publicly accessible art which needs to be recognized and revalued in the African American canon.

The kind of writing recovered in this chapter deserves renewed attention, either for crossing lines within or for militating against the cultural borderlines of so-called "authentic" African American prerogatives. Many of these texts have been long forgotten, often because they were the avant-garde of a historical moment that passed too fast. Sometimes speaking in literary languages that did not cohere with a mass imagination of the US national political moment, these authors did not always find an immediately responsive audience of readers or critics. A look at literary anthologies and literary histories of a few decades ago tellingly reveals the shifting grounds of canon formations. The selective enshrinement of some authors and their works, and the public and critical disregard for others, as canons are made and remade, may be akin to the dismembering of a large literary family; thus, to look back from time to time, and to reassess, is well worth the effort. That holds true even for well-known writers who are remembered in rather partial ways, like James Baldwin, best known for his *Bildungsroman* *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and selected essays; or Gwendolyn Brooks, who is remembered for her wonderful poetry, but whose novella *Maud Martha* (1953), a forerunner feminist *avant-la-lettre* text if there ever was one, has largely disappeared from the literary landscape. Few critics have taken notice of the fact that *Maud Martha* already established the parameters for active questioning of the intricate interconnection between oppressive lines of race and gender in a black woman's life. For all its quietness, and yet its exquisite language that stands in stark contrast to its grim subject, the novella delineates the narrow range of life in the black

ghetto in the immediate postwar years, and African American aspirations to the contrary. It also raises the feminist issue of intramural relations and the black woman's desire for her own voice to be heard, achieving radical effect without any of the verbal posturing of later decades.²¹ While Brooks has been effectively canonized for her poetry, students of coming generations would be well advised to read her prose also, in order to better understand the foundations of literary and political tradition before the 1970s and 1980s, when writers such as Alice Walker, Gayle Jones, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and so many others made their entry.

Indifference, or too early neglect, has also obscured the writing of contemporaries of Walker and Morrison, who may not have developed their full potential. A case in point would be Xam Wilson Cartier (b. 1949), who published two jazz novels, *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* (1987) and *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991). With an extraordinary, eccentric gift of verbal and syntactic onomatopoeia, Wilson Cartier creates a jazz language on the printed page which has found no equal in prose. As Walter Goebel observes: "Most noticeable in Cartier's work is the experiment with the limits of semiosis, and with the rhythmicization of language; she plays with the musical possibilities of the verbal medium. Transparent signification recedes behind the experience of sound, rhythm, and suggestive atmosphere."²² As part of the growing number of African American female coming-of-age and coming-to-consciousness stories that the reaction to black nationalism produced, the text captures the vibrancy and rebelliousness of the period. For all her idiomatic articulateness and artful literary condensation of African American sound, however, over the length of entire novels Wilson Cartier's language becomes too effect-driven, too baroque, too unwieldy, and also too speculative, lacking in the economy and grace of, for example, Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have committed suicide* (first performed 1975). One would have wished young writers like her a more emphatic literate community to prod, hone, and teach them critically.

What this chapter has tried to make visible is the problem of audience. All the critical parameters that a generation of students has become used to, calling into question race, gender, class, nation, and other forms of hegemonic belongings, were already developed before the advent of Theory with a capital T. Writing across borders demands and expects readers who are willing to come along; sometimes that can be a jarring process, the call and response working only across generations, or across canonical and national boundaries.

Notes

1. The editors are grateful to Dorian Sobel for her editorial assistance with this chapter.
2. Michael Harper, "Gayl Jones, an Interview," in Michael Harper and Robert Stepto (eds.), *Chant of Saints* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 369.
3. Alain Locke, "Inventory at Mid-Century: A Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1950," *Phylon* 12.1 (1951): 5-12; 7.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.
5. William Gardner Smith, "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," *Phylon* 11.4 (1950): 297-303; 303.
6. Carlene Hatcher Polite, *The Flagellants* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 16, 17.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
9. Robert Hayden, *Selected Poems* (New York: October House, 1966), pp. 65, 70.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 69.
13. Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1985), p. 182.
14. Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), pp. 53, 55, 57.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.
19. Quentin Miller, *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), *passim*.
20. In Harper and Stepto, *Chant of Saints*, p. 176.
21. See Sabine Broeck, *Der entkolonisierte Koerper* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1988).
22. Walter Goebel, *Der afro-amerikanische Roman im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001), p. 143.

African American literature by writers of Caribbean descent

DARYL CUMBER DANCE

They dubbed it the Port of No Return. When their ancestors left that port at Elmira Beach, Ghana – or Goree Island, Senegal, or any of a number of similar African ports – and set out on the perilous journey over the ocean to the Americas, there was no going back for the New World Negroes. That is what for most Africans in the Americas was the beginning of their history. Whether resident in a small island nation or in the American colonies, whether under the domain of a British, Spanish, French, or Dutch colonial power, and whether shuttled back and forth between several of the above, New World Negroes were tied together by a history of displacement and slavery. However, for them, national domains, language barriers, and geographical boundaries were not as defining and absolute as they were for their European masters. Rather, their boundaries and borders were established by race. The best-known early work of the African Diaspora appropriately stands as the prototype of diasporic writings across borders, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, the 1789 autobiography of an African seeking to survive the Middle Passage, assert his name, vindicate his culture, define his identity, justify his very being, establish his relationship to fellow Africans in the throes of a slave system that viewed Africans as merchandise, and establish a place for himself in a colonial society.

In the ensuing years, especially in the twentieth century, countless dusky voyagers have embarked on a no less perilous journey by sea from their small island nations in the Caribbean to the United States (or some other colonial power). Though the difficulties of entry make them more than aware of geographical borders, the literature produced by these voyagers ultimately forces the reader to question the reality and significance of such geographical borders. Landing in New York, or Miami, or wherever the port of disembarkment, would prove to be only the beginning of the travelers' journey. Then there

would be the efforts to make their place in this cold, strange, and hostile new land, and ultimately the looking back to make the connections with the Caribbean and ultimately Africa in a search for self-identity. Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1973) seems the blueprint of the autobiographical journey over seas that has come to be the story of twentieth-century African American/Caribbean writers seeking to connect the seemingly disparate parts of themselves, secure a home and a mother tongue (i.e., a language), and become whole. *Rights of Passage* is the first volume in *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite's trilogy dealing with the New World Negro's reclamation of his spiritual ground through learning about and accepting his past. *Rights* deals with the dislocation of the New World Negro and his loss of identity, pride, and culture in a colonized society. In *Masks* Brathwaite takes the New World Negro back to Africa, where he is at first lost, but he travels through his history, and the volume ends with hope that he may find himself: "I am learning/let me succeed."¹ The third volume, *Islands*, brings the New World Negro back to the Islands and the realization that the African rituals and gods that gave life meaning have not been completely lost. There are many signs of corruption and ignorance, but there is also occasionally one who remembers.

For many writers in the United States the journey actually began with Caribbean parents who migrated with their children, as is the case with Rosa Guy, Michelle Cliff, and Opal Palmer Adisa; or parents who, after they became settled, sent for these children they had left behind, as is the case with Edwidge Danticat; or parents who gave birth to their children after they arrived, as is the case with Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde (1934–92). Other writers, such as Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, Elizabeth Nunez, Jamaica Kincaid, and Marie-Elena John migrated to the United States on their own and have become a part of the American canon. A final group of Caribbean writers, such as C. L. R. James (1901–89), Derek Walcott, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Erna Brodber, Velma Pollard, and Earl Lovelace, were not so much migrants to the United States, as students, professors, researchers, and/or political activists visiting for periods of time, and will not be treated in this study.

The journey of all except the latter group involves both the trauma of sailing away from all that is familiar and the agony of the outsider who does not quite fit into the American or African American world. Then ensues the often contradictory efforts to assimilate, to become a part of the American dream, to "buy house," to embrace white culture and values, to become "white," while at the same time desperately struggling to hold on to island culture and speech. For many this journey was, like slavery, a kind of silencing, a sense of

nonexistence, a recognition that they, their language, their culture, their history, were irrelevant and inferior. Their antagonists were not only white Americans, but all too often African Americans, who made fun of them and their speech and called them "monkey chasers." Opal Palmer Adisa says that when she lived in New York "West Indians and African-Americans ... were separated by a sea of distrust."² Though there are certainly numerous indications of cooperation between African Americans and Caribbean immigrants, many of the newcomers often avoided association with their black American counterparts, whom they criticized as unambitious, lazy, and deserving of the discrimination they suffered. Oddly enough, a part of the dilemma of disruption and identity stems from the relationships of the Caribbean voyagers with their own immigrant communities and their parents. Paule Marshall informs that she left Brooklyn "in youthful rebellion against the West Indian 'buy house' fixation and the materialism that was so much a part of it."³

While a number of male Caribbean writers create sympathetic and even romantic pictures of their mothers, many of the female writers present mothers who abandon or alienate their daughters. Sometimes the sense of abandonment that the daughters feel is the result of the mothers' leaving them in the Caribbean while they relocate in the United States. In some instances the daughters feel abandoned as their mothers pursue the American dream of material success, sometimes working long hours at two or even three (often domestic) jobs to make ends meet. Many of these mothers are larger than life and come to represent not just mother, but the ultimate oppressor: the mother country/the powerful colonizer, with the daughter being the colonized subject. Simone A. James Alexander argues that the daughters "experience zombification not singularly by the mother country but also (subconsciously) by their mothers, whose love becomes suffocating."⁴ Many of these mothers fit the young Barbadian artist Clive's description of the immigrant mothers in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: "For giving life they exact life."⁵

Issues with the fathers are no less problematic in the literature. In many instances the fathers are never present in the daughters' lives, sometimes never even acknowledging their existence; in other instances once-present fathers desert their family. The present fathers are all too often philanderers, harsh and repressive parents, or strivers for the American dream, whose children feel removed from them, fearful of them, or alienated by their rejection of black culture.

While the protagonists in most of this literature often have problems connecting with the mother and/or the father, the crucial figure in many of their lives is the ancestor, living or dead, who remained in the Caribbean and

serves as their guide to forming ties with their Caribbean homeland as well as with their African past. Many of the travelers either are raised by their grandmothers and “other mothers” or spend memorable periods with them. Their connection with the ancestor is often the source of their sense of self.

A key element in the connect or disconnect with ancestors and tradition is language. From the beginning, the language of the oppressor was forced upon the slaves, and it continues even today to be the language of the schools, the language that is proper, the language that is standard, the language that is acceptable to publishers. The necessity of adopting the language of the colonial masters creates a disconnect in the writers’ goals and their expression, as suggested by Tobagoian Canadian poet Marlene Nourbese Philip: “The challenge for me was to use that language, albeit the language of my oppression, but the only one I had, to subvert the inner and hidden discourse – the discourse of my non-being.”⁶ Similarly Jamaica Kincaid laments, “The only language I have in which to speak of this crime [colonialism] is the language of the criminal who committed the crime.”⁷ Derek Walcott discussed the quest for a “language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs and fables.”⁸ Most of the writers are committed to rescuing their own Afro-Caribbean language and utilizing some elements of the folk speech/dialect/creole in their work, even if they make modifications to make it accessible to a “foreign” reader. Their language is, after all, as Paule Marshall insists in her case, the language of “the poets in the kitchen.”⁹ As Rosa Guy puts it, the speech patterns these writers had sometimes ridiculed as children have now “be[come] our poetry.”¹⁰ Maryse Condé declared in an interview with Emily Apter, “I’d like to create a ‘Maryse Condé language.’ I haven’t found it yet; I’m still searching.”¹¹ Ultimately, the writers know, as Paule Marshall has declared, that “language is the only homeland.”¹²

The related matter of the silencing of women is often an issue. The battle to find a voice includes the freedom to express oneself, to break out of the historical silence imposed upon Africans as slaves, upon women as second-class citizens, upon immigrants as outsiders, upon outsiders with limited access to the media. Clearly reflecting this dilemma is the frequently appearing character in the literature who, like the young Maya Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, refuses to speak. Clare of Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* does not speak for years.¹³ Xuela of Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* did not speak until she was four,¹⁴ and then she spoke in English, a language she had never heard spoken and “the language of

a people I would never like or love";¹⁵ tellingly, the "first words [Xuela] learned to read [were] THE BRITISH EMPIRE."¹⁶ This silence must be transformed into language and action, Audre Lorde insists: "what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared."¹⁷ Elsewhere, she has proclaimed, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."¹⁸

Though the literary journey to the United States is often viewed initially as permanent, most of this immigrant literature focuses upon *return*, going back, recapturing the Caribbean homeland, the African ancestral home, and the ancient belief system, and preserving it for posterity. Neither time, nor death, nor ocean, nor the betrayal of mothers and fathers can deny the voyagers their recapturing of the Caribbean and Africa, and thus of their true selves. Through the power of language, they give birth to their African American/Caribbean selves and provide a blueprint for later generations. While these journeys apply as much to male writers as to female, there is no question that concomitant with – and even a part of – the Renaissance of African American women writers has been the remarkable oeuvre of female writers of Caribbean descent, and the focus in this chapter will be on the women.

Within the context of their nation, their race, and their sex, many of these women writers – not unlike their male counterparts – seek to distinguish and distance themselves from the old prescribed Western male-dominated theories that have not reflected *them*, their lives, and their works. While among the writers and critics are diehard modernists, postmodernists, deconstructionists, postcolonialists, feminists, etc., there is still often suspicion of Western criticism as another imperialist project. Indeed some, like Barbara Christian in her 1987 "The Race for Theory," still insist that current linguistic jargon of elite critics seeks to silence black women writers.¹⁹ This is reinforced by scholar/writer/professor Opal Palmer Adisa, who insists that these "theories ... rather than illuminating the works under exploration, obfuscate and problematize these works so that students are rendered speechless, [one telling me] 'I can't talk that talk, so I end up not saying anything.'"²⁰ In the session "The Daughters of Anacaona Speak: Haiti and the Caribbean," at the 2006 Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Scholars and Writers, the women generally discounted the term "magical realism": Evelynne Trouillot declared that magical realism is "not a literary scheme or literary choice, but a way of looking at life." Edwidge Danticat asserted, "If things seem out of the ordinary, it is not magical realism, but something that has been in our realities. We wrestle with a shifting reality. Feeling brave enough to write it is magical realism." For many of these writers who are creating new characters in unfamiliar situations, telling new stories in a new language, and addressing themselves to a new audience, there is a need for theory that grows

out of their own lives and responds to their own culture and experiences. As Marjorie Thorpe pointed out in her keynote address to the Second International Caribbean Women Writers Conference in Trinidad in 1990, "I am persuaded that it is incumbent on us, the most recent arrivals [on the literary scene], not only to gain admittance to the game, but to seek to transform the rules under which the game is played."²¹ And as Audre Lorde warned in her memorable speech at the Second Sex Conference in New York on September 29, 1979: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."²²

The African Caribbean/American writer nonpareil is Paule Marshall. One of her goals throughout her long and productive writing career has been to provide the education that will lead to liberation, liberation from slavery to freedom, from silence to expression, from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge. For Marshall the first step of that journey is reconnecting with Africa and appreciating the historical links between African Americans and West Indians, "the two great wings of the black diaspora in this part of the world."²³ In fact, Marshall insists, "I don't make any distinction between African American and West Indian. All o' we is one as far as I'm concerned. And I, myself, am both."²⁴ This is the lesson of her body of fiction, which includes *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Reena and Other Stories* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), and *The Fisher King* (2000).

Crucial to Marshall's canon is the short story "To Da-duh, in Memoriam," first published in *New World* in 1967 and reprinted in *Reena*. In this story a Barbadian immigrant takes her confident nine-year-old New York daughter to Barbados to meet her mother, familiarly called Da-duh. Biblical and African imagery used in the description of Da-duh immediately suggests that this tiny old lady is larger than life. There develops an immediate competition between granddaughter and grandmother to prove the superiority of their respective homes. At first the child is frightened by the unfamiliar sugar cane and unimpressed by the natural wonders of Barbados, and Da-duh is incredulous of her granddaughter's tales of skyscrapers and other mechanical wonders, not to mention a place where black people "[beat] up white people!"²⁵ When finally the granddaughter projects some mechanical wonder to overshadow every aspect of Barbados's magnificent plants and mountains that Da-duh proudly shows off to her, we sense Da-duh's defeat in a world that she "can scarce recognize ... anymore."²⁶ By this time, however, the granddaughter feels no sense of pleasure in her triumph, for the fact of the matter is that she has been more influenced by Da-duh than she recognizes and through her she has already begun that journey to her roots. The contest between these two

highlights the destructive forces of colonialism that destroy the world of Da-duh. At one point she comments to her granddaughter: "they does throw these canes into some damn machine ... and squeeze out all the little life in them to make sugar for you all so in New York to eat."²⁷ Again, we are told that Da-duh's son had died working on the Panama Canal. Soon after the child returns to New York, Da-duh dies of a heart attack when British planes swoop down over her village in a "show of force,"²⁸ "rattling her trees and flattening the young cane in her field."²⁹ Thus she is killed by the technology that she resisted and feared all of her life, but she lives on in her New York granddaughter who, as an adult, retreats to paint pictures full of Barbadian scenes and African images, all inspired by Da-duh. There is no doubt that we have here the *raison d'être* for the work of Marshall, as she says in an interview:

[Da-duh] appears in one guise or another in most of my short stories and in *all* of the novels. She embodies for me that long line of unknown black men and women who are my forebears. It's about creating a history for myself ... I only knew her briefly and I was a little girl at the time. But even so I sensed her special force and her resiliency, her spirit ... She was this stalwart Black woman. I've always identified with her. In fact I've always felt that I was more *her* child than my mother's. And her heir as well, in the sense that I have the feeling I was perhaps put here on this earth to preserve and continue her essence ... I am in many ways an unabashed ancestor worshipper. I need the sense of being *connected* to the women and men, real and imaginary, who make up my being. Connection and reconciliation are major themes in my work.³⁰

Though Marshall has dubbed "Da-duh" her most autobiographical work,³¹ the one that follows more closely the particulars of her own family and life growing up in Brooklyn is *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Here there is a detailed account of the young Selina Boyce, born like Marshall to immigrant Barbadian parents in a Caribbean community in Brooklyn who religiously hold on to some of their Caribbean culture (speech, music, rituals, foods) and raise their children to regard Barbados as home, at the same time that they ferociously strive to establish a place – a house – in America. Indeed the community's center is the Barbadian *Homeowners* Association, whose goal is ownership of a brownstone in the right community. Throughout we are reminded of the racism and prejudices all of these people face or faced in their Barbadian homeland and in New York – segregated housing, economic deprivations, difficulties in the education system. None of this, however, deters most of this determined community, whose goal is provided by one of their spokesmen: "We ain white yet. We's small timers! ... But we got our eye on the big time."³²

Selina's father, Deighton, does not share his community's aspirations. He remains a romantic who dreams of return to Barbados, a dream that seems possible after he becomes heir to some land there. He is seen by his daughter Selina as a "dark god" who "had fallen from his heaven and lay stunned on earth."³³ His inability to adapt to a new technological, materialistic, capitalistic society dedicated to attaining a brownstone is reinforced when he crushes his arm in a machine at the factory where he works, an event that Selina envisions in language reminiscent of Da-duh's description of the destruction of sugar cane: "the huge hungry maw of the machine ... clamped down on his arm, sucking it in... then spewing it out crushed."³⁴ The mother, Silla, on the other hand, becomes a machine, willing to work her fingers to the bone and even sell her husband's land without his knowledge, in order to get her brownstone. Silla, here, is not simply "mother" but "*the* mother,"³⁵ not just *the* mother, but *mother country*, representing the powerful colonizer with the daughter and the husband her colonized subjects. Like the colonial power, the aptly named Silla (suggestive of the Greek monster Scylla) is cold, formidable, self-centered, greedy, and destructive. Her husband frequently reminds her, "You's God."³⁶ Further, the house for which Silla sacrifices everything represents in the novel not just the security that she seeks but also imprisonment, division, destruction of family.

Deighton has about as much chance in his conflict with Silla as Da-duh has in her confrontation with the British planes. Deighton, who is associated with the sun and the natural elements of Barbados, sleeps in the sun parlor, separated from Silla's bedroom by tall, locked French doors. Once Deighton secures his revenge by squandering all of the money that Silla has got from the sale of his land, he leaves the family and joins the Father Peace Movement. Silla retaliates by reporting her illegal-immigrant husband to the authorities, and he is deported. He either falls or jumps overboard as the ship comes within sight of Barbados. Much of the novel and the battles between Silla and Deighton and Silla and Selina are set in the context of the Second World War, which ends on the same day the family receives notification of Deighton's death.

Deighton's aborted journey is one that his daughter must take in his stead. Having rejected the scholarship offered her by the Barbadian Homeowners Association and arranged passage on a ship to the Caribbean, she walks down a street of brownstones that have "been blasted to make way for a city project."³⁷ Viewing this destroyed community is "like seeing the bodies of all the people she had ever known broken,"³⁸ and she emerges as the "sole survivor amid the wreckage,"³⁹ tossing as a tribute to this American neighborhood one of the bangles she has traditionally worn since childhood. The other

bangle we assume she will wear on her return to the Caribbean homeland she has never before seen – except through the dreams of her father. Throughout the novel Selina vacillates between love and hatred for her domineering mother, whom she bitterly attacks as a Hitler when she reports Deighton as an illegal immigrant. Despite Selina's frequent anger toward Silla, she and others recognize how much they are alike; and as she prepares to leave home, Selina confronts her mother and acknowledges, "I'm truly your child."⁴⁰

We recognize that Selina's upcoming trip is one part of the journey that she must take, but within the full context of Marshall's work we realize that the quest for self and roots is only beginning for Selina. She has recognized her loss of identity, declaring to a stranger, "I don't know what I am";⁴¹ she has experienced real and symbolic death; she has declared her independence from her mother; and she is setting out on the journey to give birth to herself. Many of the issues raised in this novel will be elaborated and resolved in later works, not the least of which is the issue of the father.

The issue of the father was finally resolved in Marshall's fourth novel, *Daughters*. In our interview, Marshall poignantly described "the pain and outrage [she suffered] at having been rejected by the one person that you loved most"⁴² when her father Samuel Burke, like Deighton in *Brown Girl*, deserted their family to join the Father Divine sect and forbade his children to call him Daddy. Unlike Deighton, Primas MacKenzie of *Daughters* is a successful politician, who despite his ongoing relationship with a "keepmiss" never leaves his family. Unfortunately, however, he becomes more and more enmeshed in the colonial politics and less and less committed to the people whom he represents, ultimately threatening to betray them. His daughter, Ursa, born in the United States and raised in the fictional Caribbean nation of Triunion, lives in New York, where the novel opens with her getting an abortion and dreading the thought of visiting Triunion and her dysfunctional family there. Ursa finally moves through the symbolic death suggested by abortion to independence and freedom on many levels, perhaps the most important coming when she returns to Triunion and conspires with her mother to overthrow her father in order to protect her island nation and its slave heroes, Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe ("coleaders, coconspirators, consorts, lovers, friends,"⁴³ whose relationship is a model for repressed black men and women everywhere, whom she was taught to revere by her American mother Estelle, and whose magnificent statue was a part of the beloved land that her father was about to hand over to American capitalists). Finally in this novel, Marshall declared, "through the story of Ursa[s] relationship with *her* father ... and her ability finally to cut away that emotional dependency, I think

I've also achieved a final purging. I've been able at last to forgive, to bless, and to release Samuel Burke from my life while retaining and honoring the love I still feel for him."⁴⁴ This novel is one of Marshall's most dramatic treatments of the handsome, charismatic, but inconstant father, of the memorable ancestors, of the relationships between black men and women, of the relationships between mothers (Ursa has several mothers in this novel) and daughter, of the relationship between African America, the Caribbean, and Africa, of the perfidy of colonialism, and of the quest of nations and individuals for voice, freedom, wholeness, and rebirth.

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* reinforces Kamau Brathwaite's earlier description of her as a novelist of the "literature of [African] reconnection," one who, in his words, "recogni[z]es the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as root living, creative, and still part of the main."⁴⁵ Here the African American Avey Johnson was raised with rituals that reinforced her African connection, the most memorable of which occurred during her annual summer visits to Ibo Landing in Tatem with her Aunt Cuney. At least twice a week Aunt Cuney and Avey would ceremoniously trek to Ibo Landing, where the slaves had refused to come ashore and had instead turned and, though still in chains, miraculously walked back out on the water to return to Africa. Aunt Cuney, having named Avey after her grandmother who had witnessed the event, ritualistically told Avey the tale as her grandmother had recounted it: "my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos."⁴⁶ Avey, her husband Jay, and their daughters had regularly enjoyed other cultural rituals that had sustained them throughout the early years of their marriage. However in the frantic quest for material success and social climbing, symbolized by a house in White Plains with its expensive silver tea service, crystal, china, and chandelier, both she and her husband, in effect, sold their souls to the devil. As her husband achieved economic success and acceptance in elite black society, he began to blame poor blacks for their own poverty and victimization, ceased all the rituals that had tied him to the black community, gave up his familial name, and shaved off the mustache that had been patterned after his father's – "the last trace of everything that was distinctive and special about him."⁴⁷ When he dies a stranger to his family, Avey is left an unhappy and silent widow who does not recognize her own face in the mirror; even her name "sounded strange" to her.⁴⁸ While she is traveling with two female friends on a luxury cruise to the Caribbean, the ancestors take over the soul of this lost creature and start her on her journey home. At first she thinks home is her White Plains house with all of its silver and crystal and china,

but the ancestors have a different home in mind. Aunt Cuney comes in a dream, tellingly sparked by the Martiniquan patois that reminds Avey of Tatem,⁴⁹ to drag her away from her present life. Like a runaway slave, a disturbed Avey flees the cruise ship, which, with its Versailles Room, is clearly reminiscent of slavery. Aunt Cuney leads Avey to Joseph Lebert, an ancestral figure suggestive of Esu-Elegbara, the West African god of the crossroads, who, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “alone can set an action in motion and interconnect the parts.”⁵⁰ Proudly acclaiming the African nations from which his ancestors came, he turns to Avey and demands, “And what you is? ... What’s your nation?”⁵¹ A stupefied Avey is unable to respond to that question until she, in effect, relives her personal and race history, experiences a symbolic Middle Passage during which she is purged and becomes an infant, and, in effect, learns to walk again in the Nation Dance at Carriacou, recalling to the reader the Ibos’ determination to conquer the ocean to return home to Africa. At the Big Drum Ceremony, Avey is pulled into the circle of those doing the dances; at first she steps cautiously “as if the ground under her was really water – muddy river water – and she was testing it to see if it would hold her weight”;⁵² soon, however, she moves to the rhythms of the music, easily joining in dance movements that she has never done but always known, having first seen them in the ring shout at a little church in Tatem. And when one of the Islanders asks “And who you is?” this time Avey unhesitatingly asserts her name as her Aunt Cuney had insisted, “Avey, short for Avatara.”⁵³ In entering the circle, Avey reenters the community, recapturing her history, and thus herself; she is now, to quote Paule Marshall, “centered,” “restored to her proper axis.”⁵⁴ The music and the dance in Carriacou serve as atavistic ties that connect her with her past, her family, her nation. At this point she recognizes those other rituals in her life that “had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music ... had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power.”⁵⁵ *Praisesong* closes with the promise of action based on Avey’s new knowledge and rebirth. Avey resolves to testify wherever she goes and to religiously pass on the story her aunt had kept alive for her. She would take her grandchildren and other young black children to Ibo Landing: “It was here that they brought them,” she, like Aunt Cuney, would begin. “They took them out of the boats right here where we’re standing.”⁵⁶ And thus ends *Praisesong*, with the promise that the New World Negro can return, for, like her great-great-gran, Avey finally “picked herself up and took off after [the Ibos].”⁵⁷

No one had more borders to cross and more reasons to be viewed as an outsider than Audre Lorde (1934–92): she was the darkest of the siblings in her

Grenadian family in New York; she was a legally blind child who remained speechless until she was four or five; she was the “biggest child by far in the whole [kindergarten] class”;⁵⁸ she underwent a mastectomy; she was a rebel all of her life; she had an interracial marriage; she was a lesbian, always “want [ing] to be both man and woman”;⁵⁹ she described herself as a “Black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother.”⁶⁰

Lorde experienced the usual conflicted relationships with her parents, both of whom never felt comfortable in America and dreamed of returning to Grenada. Even though her father was a hard-working and dedicated family man who encouraged her reading and writing, Lorde recalls that the “one emotion I can speak of concerning my dad was terror. Absolute terror,”⁶¹ and declares in *Zami*: “My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving.”⁶² Her mother was not without contradictions. Though Lorde noted in *Zami* that her mother could sometimes be “*a demon intent on destroying me*,”⁶³ she also fondly recalls that she raised her to know that her home was in the Caribbean. The mother took her three daughters to the Harlem River: “Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about ... [Grenada, Carriacou, Caribbean plants, etc.]. Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth.”⁶⁴ Lorde, like several Caribbean American writers, knew what it was to wrestle against the fear that she was becoming her mother, writing in *Zami*, “*I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers*.”⁶⁵ When Lorde returned home after her father’s death, she informed, “I saw my mother’s pain, and her blindness, and her strength, and for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her.”⁶⁶

Lorde was a prolific writer, producing twelve volumes of poetry: *The First Cities* (1968), *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), *Our Death behind Us* (1986), *Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices* (1991), *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* (1992), *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance: Poems 1987–1992* (1993), and *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997); two autobiographical prose works: *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *Zami : A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), a fictionalized autobiography that she dubbed a biomythography; and two collections of essays: *A Burst of Light* (1988), which continued her chronicling of her fight against cancer and injustices in South Africa and the USA, and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). In her poetry, her essays, her autobiographical writing, and her speeches, Lorde was the consummate revolutionary, seeking to empower the outsiders. Throughout

her work, she, like Marshall, focused on bringing together Africa and the diaspora, "all the parts of me that served me."⁶⁷

Before she saw her Caribbean "homes" (Grenada, Carriacou, and Barbados), Lorde went to Africa, where she found validation for her feminist and lesbian ideologies. Further, she was amazed there at the "incredible ... resonances" she recognized: "it is the one place where I identified with my father ... There are things that rang true for me, which I would otherwise never have put together. So one of the things that I wanted to do in *Zami* was to underline the connections between Africa, the African Caribbean, and Africans in America."⁶⁸ She focused on the African community wherever she traveled in Europe and the Americas, seeing an "international network [as] absolutely essential."⁶⁹ Shortly before her death she told Charles H. Rowell, "I am part of many communities. Poetry is a way of articulating and bringing together the energies of difference within those communities, so those energies can be used by me and others to better do what must be done."⁷⁰ Though Lorde often insisted on a rejection of many of the destructive lessons of the colonial masters, she recognized that this was one of her communities as well, insisting in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" on the fusion of the knowledge of "the white fathers" and "our own ancient noneuropean consciousness."⁷¹

After her second cancer surgery in 1987 Lorde made her home in St. Croix, "seeking a Caribbean environment,"⁷² one "where stepping out each day was not like going to war."⁷³ She had, after all, been raised to regard Barbados and Grenada as home and to believe that "someday we would return home."⁷⁴ She is, thus, one of the few among her fellow artists who did indeed actually go home again.

Similar family and race dynamics are treated in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where Clare Savage is, like Cliff, a light-skinned Jamaican brought to the United States by her parents. In the novel it is the father, tellingly called Boy, who chooses to pass as a white American and justify all of America's racism, even its lynching, which he defines as "a form of punishment for wickedness";⁷⁵ "he counsels his daughter on invisibility and secrets. Self-effacement. Blending in,"⁷⁶ reminding her, "You are an American now ... We are not to judge this country."⁷⁷ Unable to pass and preferring Jamaica, the darker mother returns home with Clare's swarthy sister, leaving Clare to agonize, "if she loved me how could she have left me?"⁷⁸ Clare's travels in the United States and England in the ensuing years only convince her of her divided state: Cliff writes, "There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments";⁷⁹ "she belongs nowhere."⁸⁰ Ultimately she decides to return to Jamaica to help her people, "rebaptis[e]" herself in the Jamaican

sea,⁸¹ seek her “restoration,”⁸² fight the “contamination from the outside,”⁸³ reclaim the slave heroine Nanny, and recover her grandmother’s land to serve as the staging area for a rebellion. Though the novel ends tragically, Clare has made the return home.

In a series of works that might be classified as novels, short stories, gardening books, political essays, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies, Jamaica Kincaid has basically told and retold the story of the Caribbean girl that is herself. Whether the book promises to focus on the girl (*At the Bottom of the River* [1983], *Annie John* [1985], and *Lucy* [1990]), her mother (*The Autobiography of My Mother* [1996]), her brother (*My Brother* [1997]), her father (*Mr. Potter* [2002]), her gardening (*My Garden (Book)* [1999] and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* [2005]), her nation (*A Small Place* [1988]), or a precolonial utopia (*Annie, Gwen, Lily, Pam and Tulip* [1986]), the narrator (and by extension, the New World Negro) is really the subject and the effort to secure freedom from imperialism and domination is the plot. And whether the narrator is called Little Miss, Annie John, Lucy, Xuela, Jamaica, or Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson (Jamaica Kincaid’s true given name), she embodies the emotional soul of Jamaica Kincaid. The Kincaid narrative is almost always about the young woman’s conflict with domination (usually in the form of her mother), and her efforts to escape, find freedom, and recreate herself; or, to put it another way, the narrative is always about the dilemma of a small Caribbean nation (usually Antigua) and its colonial domination. When asked how much of her work is autobiographical, Kincaid declared, “All of it, even the punctuation.”⁸⁴ Her earliest fiction (and to some degree her later work) basically treats a bright but mischievous child who for the first years of her life enjoys the undivided attention of doting parents, especially the mother, a beautiful Dominican of Carib Indian and Negro heritage. The paradise is traumatically disrupted, however. Not until later works do we realize that the disruption is at least partly caused by the appearance of three brothers, the first of them born when the girl is nine. No longer the center of her parents’ attention, the girl must now sacrifice the things she loves in order to care for these brothers and to see that they are educated.

Much of Kincaid’s oeuvre is rooted in death in one form or another, death of people, relationships, trees, and nations. Several major scenes in many of her works take place in a graveyard. She wrestles with the meaning of death in everything she writes. In *At the Bottom of the River*, she reflects: “Inevitable to life is death and not inevitable to death is life. Inevitable. How the word weighs on my tongue.”⁸⁵ *The Autobiography of My Mother* ends, “Death is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things.”⁸⁶ Her novels

often begin with death, real and symbolic, and focus upon a young narrator who must be reborn to escape and find life and freedom. *Annie John* treats Annie's evolving knowledge of death as she witnesses funerals, observes the deaths of friends and neighbors, and learns about the deaths of her stepfather's grandmother and her mother's brother. In *Annie John* and several other works there is a similar account of the child and the neighbor woman who died in her mother's arms. Here and elsewhere Kincaid dramatically portrays varying accounts of the death of the mother's brother, whereupon a worm crawled out of his leg because of his father's refusal to allow his mother to use Obeah to cure him (in *The Autobiography of My Mother* it is Xuela's stepbrother who dies thus). Annie John painfully suffers the death of her idyllic relationship with her mother when she is no longer the sole center of her attention. Finally, during a long rain, she undergoes a long illness, during which she becomes an infant again and from which she emerges a different person entering a new and different world and proclaiming her own name. The dominant subject of *My Brother* is Kincaid's youngest brother Devon Drew, who died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of thirty-three. As she wrote this book, she imagined the deceased William Shawn (her editor and father-in-law) reading it: "I wrote about the dead for the dead."⁸⁷ She bitterly hates her brother for being born, for disrupting the family, for impoverishing the family, for causing her to be sent away to Dominica, for being the cause of her mother's burning of her books, for dying of AIDS, for never fulfilling his promise in life ("nothing came from him; not work, not children, not love for someone else,")⁸⁸ and for reminding her of the disastrous life she barely escaped. Throughout this tragic book, we recognize that Kincaid is seeing herself in her doomed brother: he shares her love of books; he is also smart and intelligent; he too does well in exams; he is a talented artist (musician); he might have written a book on gardening. She prolongs his life by providing medications and other material help. She wrestles with the issues she and he have with their mother. She struggles with her own fear of death – "When I heard about my brother's illness and dying, I knew, instinctively, that to ... make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it."⁸⁹

Contradictory relationships with parents permeate Kincaid's work. The portrait of the father in *Annie John* is that of an old, unattractive, and poor, but attentive and loving man who cared for the daughter during her illnesses, worked hard to support his family, and built their house and everything in it. In *My Brother* the stepfather is contemptuously portrayed as an old and sickly spawner of children that he could not support, thereby making her life miserable. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* the motherless Xuela is raised

(and often abused) by other families, with whom her father places her, or by her cruel stepmother, who tries to kill her. She denounces "the number of times he had placed me squarely within the jaws of death ... [and] failed to be a father to me, his motherless child."⁹⁰ This mixed father also chose his Scots heritage over his African: "My father rejected the complications of the vanquished; he chose the ease of the victor"⁹¹ and "came to despise all who behaved like the African people";⁹² he "had built so completely another skin over his real skin."⁹³ Thus though she sometimes lived with this father, she never knew him and wondered if he knew himself.⁹⁴ Though patois was the "expressions of his real self," he rarely spoke patois, and thus "he died not knowing me, not ever speaking to me in a language in which I could have faith, a language in which I could believe the things he said."⁹⁵ Of this father who preferred his son over his daughter, Zuela acknowledges, "I did not love my father, I grew to love not loving my father."⁹⁶

Kincaid's greatest antipathy is reserved, however, for the portrait of her actual father in *Mr. Potter*, the father whom the protagonists in her first novels did not even know existed, the uncaring and licentious father who was completely absent from Kincaid's early life, appearing only when she was thirty-three and living in the USA, with only his nose to indicate their connection: he proudly proclaims that all his female offspring had noses similar to his.⁹⁷ All the shocked Kincaid can find voice to say to him is, "What am I to call you?"⁹⁸

The overwhelming issue in most of Kincaid's work is really her emotional rendering of the intense love-hate conflict she has with her mother, whom she sometimes loves passionately ("the only true love in my whole life"⁹⁹ and other times wishes dead. The most painful death in Kincaid is the death of the idyllic relationships she enjoyed with her mother until adolescence, the time varying slightly in different accounts. After this she is more comfortable hiding under the house plotting against her mother, reminiscent of the many symbolic uses of the victim's underground retreat in diasporic literature, such as W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Comet" (1920), Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Michael Anthony's *A Year in San Fernando* (1965). Kincaid's work reveals that she never gets over her jealousy of her mother's relationship with her father, with her brothers, and even with her own children. She can never forgive her mother for giving birth to her brothers, for anticipating advanced education and accomplishments for her sons and not for her daughter,¹⁰⁰ for her intimacy with her husband

(Kincaid's stepfather), for burning her books ("These books were my life ... the only thing that connected me to a world apart from the cesspool I was in"),¹⁰¹ for forcing her to eat certain foods, for calling her a slut, for turning her back to her, and even for her warm relationship with her grandchildren (they loved her, wanted to be with her, and ate everything she offered them while they would not eat for Kincaid).¹⁰² She blames her mother for all of her problems, even her own sexual rigidity.¹⁰³ One might argue that her oeuvre is her effort to advance her account of the story, since, as she told Brad Goldfarb, "her [the mother's] telling of [events] is always so different from how I remember it."¹⁰⁴ Indeed she told Kay Bonetti that though she imagines her mother does not read her work, she is "the person I really write for."¹⁰⁵ One might also argue that her writing is an attempt to get revenge upon her mother for burning her books; she ends *My Brother* by declaring, "it would not be strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again."¹⁰⁶ The horror of Kincaid's battle with her mother is the recognition that she is becoming her mother. She is appalled at the fact that her children regard her with the same conflicting emotions that she feels for her mother.¹⁰⁷ She seems not to recognize that her response to her daughter's musical interest is akin to her mother's lack of encouragement of her writing (and consistent with stereotypes of West Indian immigrants): Kincaid, desiring a Nobel Laureate rather than an entertainer, encourages her daughter to study math, asking her husband, "Does the world really need one more somewhat brown person singing?"¹⁰⁸ Kincaid's Lucy declares, "I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother."¹⁰⁹ In *At the Bottom of the River* her persona speaks of the peace she feels when she imagines that she and her mother are "in complete union ... for I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began ... I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother's arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach."¹¹⁰

Always the Kincaid protagonist remains this child, seeking, in the words of Giovanna Covi, "to become herself, birth herself, re-invent herself,"¹¹¹ seeking to free herself from the overpowering mother, who is sometimes described as godlike and other times demonic. In *Lucy* she is "a ball of fury, large, like a god."¹¹² In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela's stepmother attempts to kill her.¹¹³ In her interview with Goldfarb, Kincaid says her own mother was a "god" and adds, "an ordinary mother would have served me better, one that didn't require great distance to escape from."¹¹⁴

If the Kincaid persona is to escape this eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing Mother, she must flee Antigua. All of her life Kincaid dreamed about coming

to the United States, and at the age of either sixteen or seventeen (accounts vary) she came to America to work as an au pair in Scarsdale, New York, and go to school, changed her name from Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid, and pretty much cut off any contact with her family for nineteen years. Some of her protagonists eagerly make the trip to the United States or to Britain, always excitedly celebrating their exit from Antigua, which they insist will be permanent. As Annie John contrives her journey away from her mother and her nation, one which "I have arranged to be permanent,"¹¹⁵ she declares that she is leaving her mother, father, and island home "forever."¹¹⁶ As she prepares to leave, she catalogues everything that she is seeing for the last time: "my heart swelled with a great gladness as the words 'I shall never see this again' spilled out inside me."¹¹⁷ However, her mother's last words to her as she prepares to sail away prove to be the prophetic curse that she has spent a lifetime trying to remove: "It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home."¹¹⁸

In her writing, the adult Jamaica Kincaid does not imagine the symbolic return to the Caribbean homeland in the romantic and nostalgic way that some of the other writers do. Rather she privileges her "delicious position of living comfortably in a place that I am not from, enjoying my position of visitor, enjoying my position of not-the-native, enjoying especially the privilege of being able to make sound judgments about the Other."¹¹⁹ She frequently asserts her pride in her American home and family in an all-white town and affirms her desire to escape everything connected with the Caribbean. Yet her occasional recognition of the fact that, even with her "New World sophistication," she is one of those people from somewhere else¹²⁰ forces the reader to discern the need of this woman who renames herself "Jamaica" to embrace and at least spiritually return to that Caribbean home. In *My Garden (Book)*, she writes with pride of the gardens she establishes in American homes previously owned by whites and of her discovery of the histories of these homes and their owners, but the homes remain "old Mrs. McGovern's House"¹²¹ or "Dr. Woodworth's house."¹²² And she acknowledges that her gardens in these homes "resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it," and that those gardens are for her "a way of getting to a past that is my own."¹²³ Symbolic of her outsider status and her alienation from her homeland are those moving scenes when she (or her fictional counterpart), unable to swim and fearful of the water, looks on enviously from the shore as her mother and brother frolic in the water in *My Brother* and as her mother and father sit laughing and "tracing patterns on [a] rock" far out in the sea in *Annie John*. The reader also recognizes the gravity of her loss of

language: in *My Brother*, she claims to have forgotten the Creole¹²⁴ and her British English is so pretentious that her brother ridicules it. The reader also senses her tragic loss of a place in the family: "That night as he lay dying and calling the names of his brothers and his mother, he did not call my name ... [I was] not ... included in the roll call of his family."¹²⁵ Indeed her loss of comfort in the Caribbean and her need to create, in effect, her mother's gardens in her cold, all-white Vermont home belie her need to experience again that ancestral embrace by her grandmother Ma Chess that brings healing and rebirth to her in *Annie John*. For after all she recognizes as she looks out at the water in varied places in the USA: "the frozen waters of Lake Michigan were ... not like the blue of the Atlantic Ocean in the West Indies (the Atlantic Ocean in Nova Scotia or Martha's Vineyard is not blue at all, it is a gray, a gray that signals the beginning of the end of things)."¹²⁶ And most tragically of all, the reader recognizes everywhere her loss of self. Though her brother "called me by the new name I had given myself, he did not know the self I had become."¹²⁷ Even more disastrous, she "did not know ... the self I have become";¹²⁸ "The person I had become I did not know very well."¹²⁹ In *Lucy* she writes that she continues in the process of "inventing myself."¹³⁰ One senses that that process cannot be truly completed until she is able to truly go home again.

The painful mother-daughter conflict that Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat depicts in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) may remind us of Kincaid, but the novelist's goal is more reminiscent of Marshall. Like Marshall she focuses on the dilemma of the Caribbean immigrant's search for voice and identity, and she too relies upon the ancestors to provide the necessary corrective to the history of her nation: "I look to the past – To Haiti – hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with – the ones that have passed on – will choose to tell their story through my voice ... For those of us who have voice must speak to the present and the past. For we may very well be Haiti's last surviving breath, eyes, and memory."¹³¹ In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, published when the author was twenty-four years old, the protagonist, Sophie Caco, is torn away from her beloved aunt and grandmother when she is twelve years old and sent to America to join a mother she does not even remember. In the USA she endures the nightmares of her mother, Martine, "a frightened insomniac"¹³² who, like Haiti, cannot recover from her history of rape and violence. She cannot bear the face of her daughter who, she assumes, resembles the rapist who impregnated her. Martine is also obsessed with issues of color and class, so that she bleaches her skin, suffers eating disorders, and insists that Sophie must become a doctor and marry a person of proper family, education, and profession. Even worse, she subjects her daughter to

“testing,” a painful and demeaning practice of testing a girl to be sure she is still a virgin. Sophie also endures the usual problems of the immigrant in the United States: learning a new language and enduring taunts from cruel classmates because she is different. Even after Sophie escapes her mother’s home and marries, she cannot escape the nightmares and she does not find freedom. Finally she returns to her grandmother Ifé in Haiti. Like many ancestral figures, Ifé possesses the ancient knowledge, tells her the old stories, introduces her to the traditional culture, and lovingly teaches her what she must do to effect a change in her life: “You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself.”¹³³ Just as it appears that Sophie and Martine, thanks to Ifé, are about to achieve some resolution of their conflicts, Martine succumbs to her nightmares and commits suicide. Though Martine had found it painful to visit Haiti during her life, she will be brought home in death. After her mother’s funeral, Sophie hysterically attacks the cane in the field where her mother was raped. Her grandmother holds back the priest who tries to stop her, and shouts to her, “‘*Ou libéré?*’ Are you free?”¹³⁴ The grandmother then caresses her and reminds her that “words can give wings to your feet ... the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: ‘*Ou libéré?*’”¹³⁵ Not only does Ifé lead Sophie to recognize how much she is like her mother, but she is also largely responsible for the promise for the next generation, Sophie’s infant daughter, Brigitte Ifé, who promises to escape the curse of Martine and Sophie. This child is named after her great-great-grandmother Brigitte and her great-grandmother Ifé; she has her grandmother’s face (“we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking in her face”);¹³⁶ she sleeps well; she betokens comfort in her dual heritage; she has a strong and loving American father; she first calls her mother Manman (the Haitian Creole for mother); and, thanks to her Great Grand Ifé, she will own land in Haiti. Brigitte Ifé is both American and Haitian: as an infant she survives her trip to Haiti without any problems and the reader is confident that she is a child who will be at home both in America and in Haiti. Her great-grandmother’s declaration that “we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking in her face”¹³⁷ reminds us of Paule Marshall’s Sonny, with his African, African American, and Caribbean heritage, of whom we are told that to his foster mother, his “face ... reflected them all ... that little face. The outward and visible sign of their continuing presence,”¹³⁸ an observation confirmed by his great grandmother who, seeing in his face her family’s eyes as well as traces of his West Indian family, declares, “You got some of all of us in you, dontcha?

What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you?"¹³⁹ Giselle Liza Anatol's description of Sonny as "the quintessence of the African diaspora ... a perfect representative of cultural bridges"¹⁴⁰ is also applicable to Brigitte Ifé. Both Marshall and Danticat insist on bringing Southern American heritages into these children who symbolize "cultural bridges." It is interesting to note that a number of Caribbean writers have suggested a closer affinity to Afro-Southern culture than to other parts of the US, especially Erna Brodber.

Since she came to the USA at nineteen to attend college, Elizabeth Nunez, who was born and raised in Trinidad, has written five novels focusing upon the importance of maintaining traditional African and Caribbean cultural and religious practices in an inhospitable dominant Western society. Her autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998), portrays the dilemma of Sara Edgehill, who, despite the warnings of her grandmother and others in Trinidad, is not prepared to cope with the racial and cultural issues she confronts as a college student in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Her journey to self-realization includes a recognition that she is "link[ed] ... irreversibly to Black America"¹⁴¹ and an introduction to the ancient arts of Obeah, which teach her to love herself and open herself to her spirit.

Particularly relevant to this discussion – and unique to it – is Maryse Condé's fourth novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), which, according to Ann Armstrong Scarboro, is "the first francophone Caribbean novel to connect the English Caribbean with the colonial United States."¹⁴² Unlike the other writers treated here, this prolific Guadeloupean writer came to the United States to teach at various American universities (including the University of Virginia, the University of California at Berkeley, and Columbia University) only after she was an established novelist. Condé was educated in France and has lived and worked in Africa (Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal) and Europe (London and Paris). She returned to the Americas in 1986, residing since then between the United States and Guadeloupe. Though Condé has declared that as a writer she will always be on the move and though she rejects the myth of the romanticized return to one's native land,¹⁴³ she has achieved a Guadeloupean homecoming not unlike Lorde's, declaring in an interview: "I made peace with the island and having done so, I also made peace with myself in a way."¹⁴⁴ In *Tituba* Condé reclaims and gives fictive history and voice to the Barbadian slave who was arrested for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, while denouncing American hypocrisy and racism ("little has changed since the days of the Puritans," she told Scarboro).¹⁴⁵ Her expressed goal was to "turn Tituba into a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary 'Nanny of the maroons'"¹⁴⁶ – and,

one might add, like Marshall's Congo Jane. Also like Marshall, Condé aspires to correct and revise history. She declared, "This woman was unjustly treated by history";¹⁴⁷ and averred, "It is a kind of challenge to find out exactly what was there before. It is not history for the sake of history. It is searching for one's self, searching for one's identity, searching for one's origin in order to better understand oneself."¹⁴⁸

Condé conceives Tituba as a mixed child born in Barbados to Abena, a black slave raped by a white European, who, like Danticat's Martine, is unable to look at her daughter without being reminded of her rape by a white European. Abena's husband, however, claims the child as his own and gives her a name to signify his love.¹⁴⁹ Condé has the adult and free Tituba follow her lover to Massachusetts, where she allows herself to become a slave to both her husband and his white master. Though she is a woman trained in ancient knowledge and African rituals, including sorcery, conjuring, and Obeah, she is separated from the ancestors who are her mainstay when she is, in the words of the spirit of her biological mother Abena, "dragged off to the other side of the water";¹⁵⁰ Mama Yaya, her main ancestral spirit guide, warns her that even the spirits have trouble "cross[ing] the water."¹⁵¹ Ultimately Condé's Tituba is freed from prison and slavery and returns home to Barbados, where she is, ironically, hanged for her role in a doomed rebellion, her executioner exclaiming, "What they should have done to you in Boston, we're going to do here."¹⁵² Though this rebellion, like Cliff's in *No Telephone to Heaven*, ends in martyrdom, the Epilogue leaves the reader more sanguine, for Tituba is in the spirit world with her ancestors and she and her Barbadian homeland have "become one":

And then there is my island. We have become one and the same. There isn't one of its footprints I haven't trod. There isn't one of its streams I haven't bathed in ... This constant and extraordinary symbiosis is my revenge for my long solitude in the deserts of America. A vast, cruel land where the spirits only beget evil.¹⁵³

Reminiscent of the tragic but triumphant return home treated in *Tituba* and *No Telephone* is Marie-Elena John's first novel, *Unburnable* (2006), whose heroine, Lillian Baptiste, came to the USA as a young teen but is obsessed with the need to return to Dominica to clear the reputations of her grandmother, who was hanged for murder, and her mother, who suffered persecution as a prostitute, both subjects of scandalous *chanté mas* songs during Carnival. This novel brings together African American and African Dominican cultures informed by their African background. Instead of finding her release

in life, Lillian joins her ancestors and her folk culture through a planned suicide that she manipulates at the place “where the Maroons had jumped”¹⁵⁴ in order to motivate songs of her death as a feared *soucouyant*. The author, who was born and raised in Antigua, came to the United States to study at New York’s City College. She plans to continue to write about the impact of slavery and colonialism, the interactions of West Indians and African Americans, and the African influence on New World Negroes. Given her study at the University of Nigeria, her focus on Africa in her graduate studies at Columbia University, her work as an Africa development specialist, and her determination to “reconstruct ... our history for ourselves,”¹⁵⁵ it seems clear that she joins the sisterhood of countless African American women writers of Caribbean descent whose work negates the finality of the Port of No Return, demonstrating rather that return can take place in the physical sense or through the spirit, as was the case with Avey’s grandmother: “her body ... might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos.”¹⁵⁶

Notes

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4. Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 19.
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7. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).
8. Derek Walcott, “What the Twilight Says: An Overture,” in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1970), pp. 3–40; p. 17.
9. Paule Marshall, “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” in *Reena and Other Stories* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1983), pp. 3–12; p. 3.
10. Rosa Guy, “Introduction,” in Opal Palmer Adisa, *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1989), pp. viii–x; p. ix.
11. Emily Apter, “Crossover Texts/Creole Tongues: A Conversation with Maryse Condé,” *Public Culture* 13.1 (2002): 89–96; 96.

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13. Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), p. 91.
14. Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p. 6.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
17. Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 40–44; p. 40.
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21. Marjorie Thorpe, "Myth and the Caribbean Woman Writer," in Pyne-Timothy, *The Woman, the Writer and Caribbean Society*, pp. 34–40; p. 39.
22. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, pp. 110–113; p. 112.
23. Daryl Cumber Dance, "An Interview with Paule Marshall," *Southern Review* 28.1 (January 1992): 1–20; 14.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
25. Paule Marshall, "To Da-duh, In Memoriam," in *Reena and Other Stories*, pp. 95–106; p. 103.
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27. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
30. Dance, "An Interview with Paule Marshall," p. 7.
31. Marshall, "To Da-duh," p. 95.
32. Marshall, *Brown Girl*, p. 221.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 131.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
39. *Ibid.*
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42. Dance, "An Interview with Paule Marshall," p. 8.
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48. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
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62. Lorde, *Zami*, p. 3.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 141 (italics in original).
64. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
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67. Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," in *Sister Outsider*, pp. 134–144.
68. Louise Chawla, "Poetry, Nature, and Childhood: An Interview with Audre Lorde," in Hall, *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, pp. 115–128; p. 125.
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71. Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," p. 37.
72. Rowell, "Above the Wind," p. 53.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 52
74. *Ibid.*
75. Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, p. 55.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
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80. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
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89. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
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Reform and revolution, 1965–1976: the Black Aesthetic at work

JAMES E. SMETHURST AND HOWARD RAMBSY II

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, black poets, literary critics, and theorists achieved an exceptional level of national visibility. Together, they produced a body of texts that exuded the spirit of Black Power self-determination and amplified the vibrant, versatile rhythms of African American expressive culture. Two books, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) edited by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal (1937–81) and *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) edited by Addison Gayle (1932–91), exemplify the confluence of creative artists and intellectuals who committed themselves to generating a culturally distinct body of artistic productions for the benefit of black audiences. More broadly, considerations of the context in which *Black Fire* and *The Black Aesthetic* emerged confirm the degrees to which a militant, nationalist ethos, the development of a black-based evaluative system of arts, and the convergence of a variety of African American writers in common publishing outlets characterized the Black Arts era. On the one hand, poets, playwrights, fiction writers, and essayists composed works that celebrated African American culture, critiqued anti-black racism, and promoted black liberation. At the same time, anthologists, magazine editors, and publishers created or sustained venues for the wide transmission of black literary art.

What made *Black Fire* so influential, in part, was its appearance in 1968, when large numbers of people expressed a burning rage regarding the conditions of African Americans. The contributors in Neal and Baraka's collection seemed to embody the spirit of rebellion and revolution that engulfed cities across the nation as black people rioted in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. Marvin X (Marvin E. Jackmon) closes his poem "That Old Time Religion" "LET THERE BE BLACKNESS OVER THIS LAND/LET BLACK POWER SHINE AND SHINE,"¹ and in his poem "Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At," Bobb Hamilton addresses a presumably white authority figure by noting "Man, your whole history/Ain't

been nothing but a hustle.”² These nationalist and confrontational sentiments were representative of black writings during the 1960s and 1970s. *Black Fire* would also increase in value and visibility over the years as many of its contributors – Sonia Sanchez, Ed Bullins, Julia Fields, Henry Dumas (1934–68), Harold Cruse (1916–2005), Lorenzo Thomas (1944–2005), Lance Jeffers, and others – achieved national recognition. Their appearance in *Black Fire* linked them to a common mission.

Similarly, Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic* published the works of such prominent Black Arts era figures as LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Hoyt Fuller (1923–81), Sarah Webster Fabio (1928–79), Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Larry Neal, and Dudley Randall (1914–2000). Gayle also reprinted essays by W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright and thus underscored the intergenerational links among black writers. Divided into sections focusing on “theory,” “music,” “poetry,” “drama,” and “fiction,” the anthology contained essays by a group of contributors who had produced volumes of poetry, novels, plays, and literary and jazz criticism. Collectively, the writings in *The Black Aesthetic* affirmed the value of artistic productions that drew on distinguishing black expressive traditions and authors who addressed the struggles of African Americans. In his introduction to the collection, Gayle noted the contributors held many views divergent from his own conceptions of the function of a distinctly African American approach to assessing literary art. Nonetheless, considerations of “black aesthetics” permeated their discussions of black literature and made Gayle’s book a foundational text.

Because of their centrality to the larger literary discourse, *Black Fire* and *The Black Aesthetic* became two of the most frequently cited Black Arts era texts. However, they were part of a larger publishing enterprise. Between the years 1965 and 1976, at least one hundred anthologies featuring or focusing on African American literature appeared. The publication of so many mixed-genre, multiauthored books with overlapping contributors and subject matter verified the proposition that this vibrant literary activity among African American writers constituted a Black Arts Movement. The mission and momentum for this movement were largely determined by political assertion and by the publication routes of Black Arts and aesthetics, and by the defining elements of Black Arts literature.

The origins of the Black Arts Movement and Black Aesthetic discourses are multifaceted and deeply rooted in African American political and literary thought. In the early 1900s, W. E. B. Du Bois celebrated the overwhelming power of “blackness” in his poem “The Song of the Smoke” and anticipated the kind of race pride that would later permeate African American literary art

of the 1960s. Similarly, beginning in 1914, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) began to promote a broad black nationalist message. UNIA-ACL further promoted their message to national and international readerships through editorials, articles, and poetry that appeared in their newspaper *Negro World* (1918–33). Artists of the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and subsequent generations of black writers collectively produced bodies of work that emphasized nationalism and critiques of racism. Yet, the phrases “Black Arts,” “the Black Arts Movement,” and “Black Aesthetic” emerged in relation to particular events and circumstances of the mid and late 1960s.

The February 21, 1965, assassination of Malcolm X inspired a group of African American artists, including LeRoi Jones, who would eventually change his name to Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Clarence Reed, Rolland Snellings (Askia Touré), and Charles Patterson and William Patterson to organize the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) in Harlem that would, in part, extend the slain leader's black radical vision. By April 1965, the group was producing plays and poetry readings in Harlem and leading classes on the arts for young people in the community. A few months later, internal conflicts led to the closure of BARTS. Although the existence of the arts school in Harlem was relatively brief, the small institution had begun to generate attention based on its militant, grassroots determination. Most importantly in retrospect, the organization had introduced the phrase “Black Arts” into the lexicon as a term for describing the work of a group of poets, playwrights, visual artists, musicians, and essayists interested in producing grassroots work on behalf of black communities. The conception of their collaborative, mixed-genre productions as Black Art influenced the view of the writers, performers, and painters as “Black Artists.”

The most visible poetic manifestation of the sentiments of Black Artists emerged in Baraka's poem “Black Art,” which first appeared as a recording on jazz drummer Sonny Murray's album *Sonny's Time Now* (1965), which was released under the imprint Jihad Press, Baraka's publishing company. Drawing on a distinct militant tone, Baraka famously announced that “poems are bullshit” unless they are confrontational, and, the poet declared, “We want a black poem/And a Black World.” In January 1966, “Black Art” was published in *Liberator* magazine, and it began to appear regularly in anthologies, thus cementing the poem, its sentiments, and its author into the canonical history of black poetry. Based in New York, *Liberator* published poetry, articles on local politics, essays on artistic culture, and reviews of literature and drama. The magazine was one among a number of periodicals,

including *Negro Digest/Black World*, *The Journal of Black Poetry*, *Soulbook*, *Freedomways*, and *Black Dialogue* that served as outlets for the presentation of black writing and reports on the developing arts scene. Between 1965 and 1966, the magazine was quite active in publishing writings that addressed a nationalist ethos and presented the idea of writers as activists.

Larry Neal, who eventually became *Liberator's* arts editor, published a range of essays in the magazine, but his coverage of the developing career of Amiri Baraka and the increasingly militant approaches taken by black writers was especially significant in conceptualizing a cultural movement. In the June 1965 issue of the magazine, Neal published a report on the recent opening weekend of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem. The opening conference included an "explosive" poetry reading; however, Neal explained that the most striking event of the weekend was a Black Arts-led parade in Harlem. According to Neal, the parade was "informal and spontaneous and should illustrate something of the potential for creative encounter existing in our community."³ Neal closed his report by predicting that the successful convergence of Black Arts and radical politics would rest on the ability of artists to meet the needs of black communities and to involve those citizens in the production of a communal art. The suggestion that black literary artists become agents acting on behalf of black community eventually pervaded Black Arts discourse.

As the group of artists organized their Black Arts institution in New York, another major cultural institution that would become central to the movement was founded in 1965, this one in Detroit. Poet Dudley Randall established his Broadside Press in order to copyright his poem "Ballad of Birmingham." Initially, he published two of his own poems and others by Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, Melvin Tolson, and Gwendolyn Brooks on sheets of cardstock paper or broadsides. Randall would later produce broadsides with poems by Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes, Naomi Long Madgett, Jean Toomer, and Sarah Webster Fabio. In 1966, while attending the Fisk Negro Writers' Conference in Nashville, Randall decided, along with poet Margaret Burroughs, to edit a collection of poems paying tribute to Malcolm X. The collection on Malcolm would have been the first book published by Broadside, but a printing problem delayed its release, making it the press's second publication. *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X* was published in 1967, becoming one of the first books of the era to feature the work of several Black Arts writers.

Edited by Dudley Randall and Margaret Burroughs and dedicated to "Mrs. Betty Shabazz," the slain leader's widow, *For Malcolm* supported the idea that

Malcolm was a political and creative inspiration for black poets; the anthology also contained a few white poets. The poems in the collection were organized under the headings "The Life," "The Death," "The Rage," and "The Aftermath"; the book also contained author photographs and a reprint of Ossie Davis's eulogy of Malcolm. The anthology contained a diverse range of African American writers, including well-known poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Baraka, "prolific and much-published poets" such as Clarence Major, John Sinclair, and Ted Joans (1928–2003), and "talented young poets" Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, and Larry Neal (1937–81).⁴ The publication of such a regionally diverse group of intergenerational poets in one site on a specific topic projected a sense of unity among the writers. The focus on Malcolm suggested that the poets shared an allegiance to black nationalist ideology. The popularity of *For Malcolm* increased the value of the Broadside imprint as a publisher of African American poetry.

During the 1960s, *Negro Digest* editor Hoyt Fuller had been observing the developments taking place among African American writers and participating in wide-ranging discussions about the arts and politics. He composed an essay in October 1967 entitled "Towards a Black Aesthetic," which would appear in *The Critic* magazine in 1968. "The black revolt," noted Fuller in the essay, "is as palpable in letters as it is in the streets"; as a result, "revolutionary black writers have turned their backs on the old 'certainties' and struck out in new, if uncharted, directions." According to Fuller, a black aesthetic referred to "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience."⁵ The formation of African American cultural institutions in New York, Newark, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Detroit, and Chicago, explained Fuller, served as evidence that black writers were indeed interested in creating their own venues for the production and valuation of their works. Fuller's use of the phrase "Black Aesthetic" and the promotion of black cultural institutions profoundly marked African American creative thought over the next several years.

When Fuller's essay appeared in 1968, he was already a well-known figure as the editor of a leading institution for the transmission of African American creative arts. Financed by John H. Johnson, owner and publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines which were based in Chicago, *Negro Digest* had a circulation of 30,000 and included an editorial staff with Hoyt Fuller as managing editor, Carole Parks as associate editor, Herbert Temple as art director, and David Llorens, who regularly assisted with editing and reporting duties. Published monthly, *Negro Digest*, which was later renamed *Black World*, was initially

modeled on the format of *Reader's Digest* and reprinted news articles relating to African Americans. Under Fuller's leadership, the magazine shifted its focus and became more of an arts publication. Between 1965 and the mid-1970s, *Negro Digest/Black World* published thousands of poems, reviews, and essays pertaining to African American history and culture. Fuller wrote a column "Perspectives (Notes on Books, Writers, Artists, and the Arts)" that kept readers abreast of book releases, events relating to African American arts, publishing opportunities, and information on black-owned presses. In addition, Fuller used his column to express his opinions about the directions of black writing. In particular, he regularly charged that white literary critics unfairly or inadequately evaluated African American literature and he thus encouraged black writers to develop their own criteria for assessing their literary art. Given the wide circulation of *Negro Digest/Black World*, Fuller's sentiments were certain to reach a broad readership and influence discussions about the directions of black writing.

As Fuller was composing his Black Aesthetic essay in 1967, he was also polling several black writers, including Robert Hayden (1913–80), Margaret Walker, John Oliver Killens (1916–87), Mari Evans, and Carolyn Rodgers on subjects pertaining to African American literature, the developing literary scene, and artistic influences. The results of Fuller's poll appeared in the January 1968 issue of *Negro Digest*. Among other queries, Fuller asked the writers, "Do you see any future at all for the school of black writers which seeks to establish 'a black aesthetic'?" Many of the writers had mixed responses to Fuller's question; most notably, however, several of them had different conceptions of what was meant by the phrase. The longest response to the question that the periodical printed was by Larry Neal, who opened by explaining that "There is no need to establish a 'black aesthetic.' Rather it is important to understand that one already exists. The question is: where does it exist? And what do we do with it?"⁶ Neal would further address the meaning and possibilities of a black aesthetic in what has become the most anthologized essay of the era, "The Black Arts Movement."

In his essay, initially published in a special issue on Black Theatre in *The Drama Review* edited by playwright Ed Bullins (b. 1935), Neal explained that "We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed ... what is needed is a whole new system of ideas." According to Neal, "the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists."⁷ Neal went on to describe the emergence of Black

Art groups across the country and the interests among artists of amplifying black perspectives and nationalist ideas in their works. The subsequent and widespread circulation of Neal's essay further popularized and clarified terms like "Black Aesthetic" and "Black Art" and promoted Amiri Baraka's status as the "prime mover and chief designer" of radical, African American artistic production.⁸ Most notably, Neal's essay initiated the now widely held view that the efforts of Black Artists constituted a movement. The phrase "The Black Arts Movement" represented a captivating label for the flourishing activities of African American artists, and the terminology Neal utilized to delineate the movement helped to shape discourses on black literary art.

The appearance of Neal's essay and writings by his fellow artists in *The Drama Review* confirmed the extent to which Black Theatre was an integral element of the movement, a form conducive to the blending of music, poetry, visual arts, and performance. Baraka, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Sonia Sanchez, and several other artists wrote engaging plays addressing such issues as African American confrontations with racism, intraracial conflicts, and the possibilities of black revolution. The emphasis on theater was central to the formation of BARTS, the production of a communal interactive art form, and the view of the movement's major figures as "artists" and not simply "writers." On the local levels, the production of black drama was influential; yet, even as black artists regularly critiqued the limits of conventional texts and celebrated the potential of live performance, the prevalence of print culture in the operation of the movement was quite apparent. Magazines and books gave writers access to readerships across time and space that were typically unavailable to real-time performers. As a result, although black artists continually blurred the lines between various modes of production by utilizing mixed media, multigenre approaches, their writings ultimately gained the widest circulation and signaled solidarity with politically active black people across the United States.

Although creative writers and critics did not come to a definite conclusion about an African American evaluative system for literary arts, anthologists, it appeared, did maximize the potential of a Black Aesthetic as a framing device for organizing a large body of African American writings. Comprehensive African American anthologies presented Black Arts poets in the same collections with past generations of writers and thus projected the idea of a longstanding tradition among black writers. Houston Baker's *Black Literature in America* (1971), Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* (1971), Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon's *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (1972), and Arnold Adoff's *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the*

20th Century (1973) published selections by Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight (1931–91), Haki Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez among others in close proximity to works by Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Langston Hughes. In an effort to showcase the “continuity and the wholeness of the Black Poetic tradition in the United States,” Stephen Henderson (1925–97), in his anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, presented one of the most dynamic gatherings of African American poetry across generations.⁹ Henderson arranged his anthology into three sections. Section I, “Pre-Harlem Renaissance and Soul-Field,” contained Georgia Sea Island songs, folks rhymes, “The Judgment Day” by James Weldon Johnson, and poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Section II, “The Harlem Renaissance and Afterward, Soul-Field,” included blues lyrics, poems by well-known figures of the New Negro era such as Hughes and Countee Cullen, and writers who came to prominence during the 1930s and 1940s, including Melvin Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and Robert Hayden. The final and largest segment, “The New Black Consciousness, the Same Difference,” consisted of poems by several writers associated with the Black Arts Movement. By highlighting the relationship of the poems to African American speech patterns and musical practices, Henderson was, in effect, illustrating the extent to which black aesthetics could be used to assemble a diverse group of writers in a centralized context.

The designs of the anthologies often emphasized nationalist ideas and situated the writers within a distinctly black context. Collections entitled *For Malcolm* (1967), *Black Fire* (1968), *Dark Symphony* (1968), *Black Voices* (1968), *Black Arts* (1969), *Soulscrip* (1970), *We Speak as Liberators* (1970), *The Black Poets* (1971), *New Black Voices* (1972), *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), and *My Black Me* (1974) alerted readers that the contents and contributors would presumably address subject matter pertaining to African Americans. Moreover, by utilizing a common discourse to organize their anthologies, the editors highlighted a vibrant network of black publishing institutions. The acknowledgment pages of the various collections revealed that the editors drew from *Negro Digest*, *Liberator*, and the *Journal of Black Poetry* and from such imprints as Broadside Press and Third World Press. The continuous publication of a select group of poets in common venues instilled the image of their solidarity.

In addition to increasing the prominence of fairly young and emergent writers, the anthologies of the Black Arts era also reintroduced modern readerships to writers whose works were largely out of print. The collections republished verse by Phillis Wheatley and Claude McKay among others and

thus gave the writers an unprecedented amount of visibility in African American and American publishing history. The anthologies elevated Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes to an even higher status by publishing their poems so frequently. McKay's "If We Must Die," Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "I, Too," Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate," Margaret Walker's "For My People," Nikki Giovanni's "Nikki-Rosa," and Amiri Baraka's "Black Art" and "A Poem for Black Hearts" circulated with such regularity that they became the poets' signature poems. Ultimately, by deciding on what kinds of poems and poets would appear most often in their collections, anthologists significantly contributed to shaping the more prevalent views of African American literature during the period.

Anthologies represented the collected works of groups of artists who were dispersed across the country. Anthologists typically turned to magazines, volumes of poetry, and previously published anthologies as sources for identifying potential contributors and contributions. In its role as the most notable imprint to showcase African American poetry, Dudley Randall's Broadside Press significantly shaped the production of poetry during the Black Arts era. The roster of poets that Randall published revealed that his press was continually located at the crossroads of multiple routes of African American poetry. In addition to publishing volumes of poetry by such emergent writers as Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti, Broadside Press also published volumes by elder poets Sterling Brown, Lance Jeffers (1919–85), Audre Lorde, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. The poets who published with Randall's imprint drew on conventional forms of verse as well as alternative vernacular poetics. Overall, Broadside Press along with Third World Press, The Journal of Black Poetry Press, and Jihad Press materialized possibilities of self-determination and black aesthetics in publishing.

Some large mainstream presses also demonstrated a concerted interest in publishing texts related to Black Arts discourse. Most notably, William Morrow and Company published several key writers and texts of the period, including LeRoi Jones's *Blues People* (1963), *Home: Social Essays* (1966), and *Black Music* (1968), Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), Jones and Neal's *Black Fire*, Mari Evans's *I Am a Black Woman* (1970), Nikki Giovanni's *Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement* (1970), along with Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Publishing with mainstream or "white" publishers could, from some perspectives, diminish the degrees to which artists were circulating their works in black contexts. At the same time,

however, well-financed publishers had the resources to publicize and distribute works by writers in ways unavailable to smaller African American imprints. Nikki Giovanni, for example, has maintained a longstanding and beneficial relationship with William Morrow and Company that has kept her works in print for over three decades now. Mentor Books, Macmillan and Company, and the Bobbs-Merrill Company also demonstrated a visible presence as publishers of verse and prose by Black Arts writers.

African American literary magazines of the period held shorter shelf-lives than major books. Nonetheless, *Liberator*, *Soulbook*, *Black Dialogue*, *Cricket*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Negro Digest/Black World* remained on the cutting edges of African American poetic discourse in terms of publishing new black poetry and initiating conversations about the aesthetics of Black Arts. These periodicals served as indispensable outlets for publicizing and assessing newly released volumes of poetry. *Negro Digest/Black World*, alone, published hundreds of poetry reviews; Johari Amini, Julia Fields, Nikki Giovanni, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, Sterling Plumpp, and Dudley Randall played especially active roles in reviewing the works of poets. The *Journal of Black Poetry* featured poets as guest editors, and all of the magazines published essays by literary artists on a regular basis.

Poetry and theater were the dominant genres of the Black Arts Movement – to the degree that the multimedia, multigeneric works of the Black Arts can be situated into traditional generic categories. However, it is hard to think of another artistic movement that was so obsessed with theory as Black Arts. Given how important study groups, reading circles, workshops, and proto-Black Studies classes were to the origins of Black Arts, this is not really surprising. Nonetheless, given the notions about the “anti-theoretical” bent of black literature and art in the 1960s and 1970s that still circulate inside and outside the academy, it is worth recalling how central theory, political, social, cultural, and aesthetic, was to Black Power and Black Arts.

In fact, the Black Arts Movement was among the first major points of entry for what became known as “high theory” in US literary studies. Of course, Black Arts and Black Power participants deployed theory differently from many critics during the “high theory” boom of the 1980s. While both Black Arts writers and poststructuralist critics questioned received notions about structures or “constructions” like “race” and “nation” and binary oppositions of beauty and ugliness, and universal and parochial, Black Arts critics and theorists did so while engaged in the enterprise of building or identifying black structures, a black nation, a black aesthetic, and black modes of subjectivity. It is in the realm of theory, criticism, and nonfiction prose, then, that the

inextricable intertwining of Black Power and Black Arts can be seen most clearly. Nation-building in the sense of consciousness-raising as well as in the construction of institutions is inevitably culture-building or cultural self-recognition. As a result, nearly all major political statements, especially more theoretical statements, had culture and the arts as a major component.

Much of the most powerful political nonfiction prose of the period was strongly rooted in a sense of black culture and was written by authors whose background was primarily in the arts and “creative” writing. A notable inspiration in this regard was James Baldwin, who in the 1960s brought the social essay to perhaps its highest level in the history of the United States. While some Black Arts activists were at first ambivalent about Baldwin, in part because of his sexuality and in part because of their initial sense of him as “a token Negro” in the mainstream literary establishment, the brilliance of Baldwin’s essays and their increasing engagement with the black freedom movement won the admiration of a large proportion of movement participants. *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), written by Harold Cruse, was seen as a landmark work critiquing various sorts of assimilationist ideologies largely seen through the lens of literature and arts. The key text of what might be thought of as Black Power/Black Arts feminism was Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology *The Black Woman* (1970). Though it contained verse by such poets as Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde and fiction by Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Sherley Ann Williams, the bulk of the anthology was devoted to essays engaging the intersection of gender, politics, and culture from the perspective of black women writers.

As the Black Arts and Black Power movements grew and began to coalesce, they became increasingly engaged with the project of developing some sort of “Black Aesthetic,” that is to say, the formation of a system of aesthetic value rooted in African American traditions through which the art of the black nation and the Black Nationalist Movement could be created, evaluated, and taught. It is important to recognize that conversations about a “Black Aesthetic” were precisely that: conversations or sets of debates, not an accepted program or a dictum handed down from central authority. Generally, the participants in the conversations saw themselves furthering a process that would lead to some sort of aesthetic system in the future – though some thought that there were attempts to push the conversation too quickly toward an overly narrow sense of blackness and black aesthetic values.

In the fall 1968 issue of the *Journal of Black Poetry*, Stanley Crouch, in his essay “Toward a Purer Black Poetry Esthetic,” encouraged his audience, presumably of writers, to develop a greater appreciation for “craft” and “standards that are Black” by looking to the creations of African American

jazz musicians as models.¹⁰ In the same issue of the magazine, in his article “Black Magic! (A Statement on the Tasks of the New Poetry),” Askia Touré urged his fellow writers “To create a *living* poetry, an oral poetry, a chant, a song to the forces of emerging Black Spirit” and later explained that “Our emerging New Poetry must be as multifaceted as our life experience here.”¹¹ Carolyn Rodgers published a series of essays in *Negro Digest/Black World* that examined the implications of emergent African American verse. Her first essay in the series, “Black Poetry – Where It’s At,” which became the most widely cited, appeared in the September 1969 issue of the magazine and utilized vernacular terms such as “signifying,” “teachin/rappin,” “bein,” “coversoff,” and “shoutin” to classify the major features of new black poetry. Similar to Crouch and Touré, Rodgers directed her comments to fellow writers, and she also demonstrated that poets were acutely attuned to the developing literary scene. The frequent appearance of these kinds of essays placed literary artists, and not simply academic writers, at the forefront of conversations about black literature. Thus, when Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic* was published in 1971, creative writers were among the collection’s most notable contributors.

In many respects, Gayle’s book was another statement – a collection of statements, in fact – in the ongoing and pervasive conversation about the roles of writers and the directions of new black writing. The presentation of an assortment of essays broadly relating to African American expressive forms and aesthetics, though, consolidated, if not condensed, a far-reaching topic into a single volume. The essays by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, and J. A. Rodgers that appeared in Gayle’s collection appeared decades before the conversation about a Black Aesthetic took on its modern manifestations. Bringing together elder established writers with Black Arts figures highlighted the trans-historical interest among writers in the culturally distinct elements of artistic production and the communal imperatives of black writers. Further, *The Black Aesthetic* was published by major mainstream presses (hardcover: Doubleday and Company, Inc.; paperback: Anchor Books) and thus gave many of the essays renewed and extended readerships. Gayle’s anthology *Black Expression: Essays By and About Black Americans in the Creative Arts* (1969) addressed issues pertaining to literary artists and arts, but Gayle’s use of “the black aesthetic” as a title and organizing principle in his 1971 collection carried a stronger resonance in Black Arts discourse.

The contributions to *The Black Aesthetic* diverge in notable ways. According to Ron Karenga (b. 1941), “all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution,

and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid.”¹² Karenga was the founder of a militant organization and not a literary artist. His prescriptive approach to what African American artistic creations should look like was linked to his position as an activist and organizer. Understandably, he was inclined to favor art that advanced an activist agenda. Fuller, on the other hand, viewed a black aesthetic as a “place” for writers that might exist beyond the “literary mainstreams.” As a facilitator and promoter of African American sites of publication, Fuller was inclined to concentrate on alternative venues for presenting and evaluating the works of black artists. Dudley Randall conceived of “the Black Aesthetic” as a term to describe the nationalist literary trend of 1960s poetry, a trend dictated in part by the presence of “black publishers, black critics, and an increasing black audience.”¹³ The essays by Jimmy Stewart, W. E. B. Du Bois, Amiri Baraka, and Ron Welburn suggested that particular developments in musical history exuded the most vibrant elements of black aesthetics. Given the divergent approaches to describe the term, the title of Gayle’s collection may have been slightly misleading. It might have been more fitting to view the anthology as focusing on multiple kinds of black aesthetics.

Darwin Turner identified what he viewed as two central weaknesses of those who sought to define a black aesthetic. For one, they tended to “denigrate older black writers while lauding the newest,” and “They are further handicapped by the necessity of devising theory prior to the creation of works.”¹⁴ For many artists, activists, and creative intellectuals discussions of black aesthetics were opportunities to propose what the future of African American writing should look like instead of an occasion for surveying and analyzing the wide range and sometimes contradictory features of 1960s black literary art. Thus, Darwin Turner was impressed by Carolyn Rodgers’s “Black Poetry – Where It’s At” because it was based on the actual writings of poets. If Rodgers’s analysis was one of the more impressive essays on black verse, then certainly poet Eugene Redmond’s *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, a Critical History* (1976) was one of the most significant book-length treatments of African American poetry.

Drumvoices covers over one hundred poets from Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, and Jupiter Hammon up through Harlem Renaissance writers to Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and other writers of the 1970s. Redmond’s book is a landmark study, charting a long view of African American poetry beginning with its verbal and musical traditions. Few individual studies had so thoroughly demonstrated the literary history of black poetry. Redmond offered biographical and bibliographical information on

lesser-known poets and situated Black Arts poets within a larger continuum of black poetic practices and publishing history. Taken together, Redmond's book and Rodgers's essay anticipated the studies on African American literature produced by academic critics that would begin appearing regularly during the 1980s.

Although the contributors to Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* had varying conceptions of Black Aesthetics, many of them seemed to agree that African American music represented the most striking model for writers to develop a more distinct body of literary art. Accordingly, poets made music a principal subject and source of inspiration for their works. Several artists envisioned such expressive forms as music and dance as culturally specific coded languages. At a climactic moment in Baraka's play *Dutchman* (1964), the main character announced that singer Bessie Smith was actually telling white audiences to "kiss my black unruly ass," and Charlie Parker could have abandoned playing another "note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw."¹⁵ In his poem "Jitterbugging in the Streets," Calvin Hernton points out that "the rage of a hopeless people" will manifest itself in the fierce and pronounced movements of a dance. Black people will respond "To ten thousand rounds of ammunition/To waterhoses, electric prods, phallic sticks/hound dogs, black boots stepping in soft places/of the body" through their defiant acts of jitterbugging.¹⁶

Certainly, poets of the Black Arts era were not the first or only group of writers to propose that cultural forms and militant writing could be used as weapons in struggles for liberation and social justice. Still, the nature of the rage expressed by poets during the time was quite notable. Drawing on the example of rebellious slaves, some poets celebrated violent actions in verse and provided their audiences with ideas about how they might emulate such heroic actions. In his poem "Nat Turner," Samuel Allen pays tribute to this important figure for leading a slave insurrection – an insurrection that terrified whites all over the South and left several of them dead. Allen writes, "From the obscurity of the past, we saw/the dark now flaming face of a giant Nathaniel/calling/whosoever will/let him come."¹⁷ Allen's poem situates Turner within a decidedly biblical context and explains that his insurrection was a call for black people to follow and respond. Allen's poem implies that from an African American perspective, a good slave was the kind who sought freedom using a by-any-means-necessary approach. Similarly, Dudley Randall's "Frederick Douglass and the Slave Breaker" and Margaret Walker's "Harriet Tubman" celebrated enslaved people responding violently to their oppressors.

In addition to challenging white authority and critiquing oppression, Black Arts poets regularly affirmed black historical figures in their works. By composing tribute or praise poems focusing on well-known African American political leaders, activists, writers, and musicians, poets not only offered readers their own political and cultural allegiances but also provided audiences with ideas about those elements that were most worthy of emulation. Tributes to black historical figures enabled poets to pursue their objectives of presenting positive and striking images of black people and to enhance the presentation of African American worldviews and values. Older generations of poets such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden, to name a few, had published tribute poems prior to the 1960s. However, the proliferation of Black Arts texts made praise poems and elegies focusing on black figures even more widely available. Black musicians were the most recurring subjects of tributes, with poems written about Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin. Next to Malcolm X (1925–65), who was the most revered overall figure in Black Arts discourse, John Coltrane was the most celebrated creative artist among poets.

After Coltrane's death in 1967, poets begin to regularly eulogize the saxophonist in their writings. Carolyn Rodgers mentions that she was inclined to pray when she heard Coltrane's music.¹⁸ In her poem "How Long Has Trane Been Gone," Jayne Cortez exhorts her black audience to lead more politically conscious and responsible lives in return for the sacrifices that Coltrane and other African American musicians had made on their behalf. And in his extended "Ode to John Coltrane," Quincy Troupe situates the musician as both a mythic and a legendary figure whose works charted African American experience. Addressing himself to the saxophonist in the opening lines, Troupe writes, "With soaring fingers of flame/you descended from Black Olympus/to blow about truth and pain; yeah,/just to tell a story about Black existence."¹⁹ Paying tribute to Coltrane and other musicians enabled poets to demonstrate their commitments to a common group of cultural figures and to project what they perceived as the revolutionary potential of jazz and other genres by providing poetic interpretations of the music.

In his poem "On Listening to the Spirituals," Lance Jeffers writes in the first-person voice of a slave who has endured the pain of seeing his five-year-old son forced to work and his wife raped by the slavemaster. In response, the enslaved man calls on the power of the spirituals for external and psychological help: "I stroked on slavery soil the mighty colors of my song, a passionate heaven rose no God in heaven could create!"²⁰ In her "liberation/poem," Sanchez explains that the blues are "sounds of/oppression/against the white

man's/shit." Thus, when she hears the "soft/soul/ful/sighs" of Billie Holiday singing "am I blue," Sanchez talks back to "sweet/baby/blue/billie" and informs her that "i'm blk/& ready."²¹ Jeffers and Sanchez suggest that music could serve as a healing force and stimulant for preparing African Americans to confront serious challenges.

The frequent celebration of music and musicians was linked to the interest among poets of stylizing themselves as performers. Poetry readings were an integral part of writers' work, and several poets produced audio recordings of their materials. Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, and Sonia Sanchez collaborated and performed their poetry to the accompaniment of jazz musicians, and Nikki Giovanni produced an album *Truth Is on Its Way* with a gospel choir. The frequent performances and numerous audio recordings of poets reading their work during the Black Arts era marked an important transformational moment in literary history and the production of African American literature. As performers of verse, the poets were inclined to become much more aware of their public personae, many of them further distancing themselves from the image of the isolated artist. In addition, as writers were becoming poet-performers, readers were being transformed into listeners.

Poets actually encouraged readers to consider the sound of Black Arts by representing African American Vernacular English (AAVE) on the page. "Within the limitations of written form," explained sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, Black Arts poets were "attempting to capture the flavor of Black American speech – its rhythms and sounds, both its dialect and style."²² The use of such verbal techniques as call and response, the dozens, signifying, and toasts allowed writers to accentuate, if not authenticate, the blackness of their literary art. By incorporating African American lexicon, grammar, and pronunciation into their prose and poetry, the writers further illustrated the existence of a black aesthetic and appealed more directly to the cultural sensibilities of their audiences. Appealing to the sensibilities of African Americans was a major stylistic feature of Black Arts poetry. Rather than produce poems to a supposed universal nondescript reader, poets oriented their poems to racially specific audiences. As a result, they further created the sense that their poetry was tapping into African American cultural values and exuding black aesthetics.

Like poetry, drama lent itself to the emerging Black Arts Movement because it could be performed in a wide range of venues: traditional stages, bars, sidewalks, the backs of flatbed trucks, auditoriums, political meetings, and housing project recreation rooms. Drama, too, was central to the institutionalization of Black Arts as well as to the preservation of the Black Arts

legacy. Black Arts drama derived from a variety of sources. An important predecessor was the Left-influenced black theater of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, such as Harlem's Suitcase Theater and American Negro Theater and the Negro Units of the Federal Theater Project. These groups put on socially conscious and often radical plays, such as Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* and Langston Hughes's *Don't You Want To Be Free?*, both originally performed in 1937, and nurtured actors, playwrights, and directors who had major impact on black theater in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis (1917–2005), Lorraine Hansberry (1930–65), and Alice Childress.

Another antecedent was the drama programs at historically black colleges and universities, such as Howard University, Dillard University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College. These institutions trained generations of black theater workers and also provided much of the initial infrastructure of Black Arts theater, especially in the South. The Civil Rights Movement, too, provided a base for new black theaters with some, most notably the Free Southern Theater, growing directly out of the movement. A less direct impact of the Civil Rights Movement was the increasing openness of previously all-white (or nearly all-white) community and regional theaters to black actors, and, less often, playwrights, directors, and technicians. Finally, the growth of a relatively large avant-garde theater movement in the 1950s and early 1960s that was comparatively welcoming to black actors, directors, and playwrights was a significant incubator of Black Arts theater. In fact, the early dramatic work of such key Black Arts playwrights as Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka was first presented in this avant-garde, bohemian milieu – though these works were sometimes recontextualized and presented later in a Black Arts context.

The Black Arts theater separated itself from its predecessors for both ideological and practical reasons. Ideologically, it responded to new currents of nationalism and calls for black self-determination, particularly those issued by Malcolm X. Practically, the black theater workers chafed at the limits imposed on them by community, regional, and even bohemian dramatic institutions. Black actors felt themselves largely relegated to what director Woodie King called “buddy roles.” Playwrights saw only infrequent or token opportunities for presenting their work. The situation for African American directors and technicians was even more limited outside of black campuses. A major impetus, then, for this new theater movement was to provide greater opportunities for the development of black actors, directors, technicians, and playwrights – as well as a black repertoire and a large black audience for that repertoire. Even groups that did not closely identify themselves with Black Arts (e.g., the Negro Ensemble Company) still saw themselves as responding

to this need for African American institutions that provided training and professional opportunities to a wide range of black theater workers, which would be otherwise unavailable.

As the Black Arts Movement grew and began to take on a national character, several broad tendencies developed in its drama. One of the highest profile, if not the most popular among black audiences, was what became known as “ritual theater.” This sort of performance was not really narrative, “realist,” or “naturalist” as it was then understood with respect to drama, but instead presented a sort of stylized tableau or pageant aimed at engaging the emotions, spirituality, culture, and psychology of black audiences.

One of the earliest articulators of this approach was Larry Neal, who put forward a notion of ritual drama in a review of Baraka’s *Slave Ship*:

One of the prime motivations behind the work is to suck the audience into a unique and very precise universe. The episodes of this “pageant” do not appear as strict interpretations of history. Rather, what we are digging is ritualized history. That is, history that allows emotional and religious participation on the part of the audience.²³

Among the leading proponents of the ritual approach were the National Black Theatre (NBT) and the New Lafayette Theatre in New York and the Kuumba Workshop in Chicago. NBT founder Barbara Ann Teer (1937–2008) took what might be thought of as an ethnographic approach to ritual. For example, she directed the group’s members to attend the services of Holiness and Pentecostal churches in order to help ground the work of the theater in the aesthetics and practices of grassroots black performance. Val Gray Ward’s Kuumba Workshop, too, produced ritual drama drawn from the black church, staging what were essentially Black Arts sermons. The 1969 *A Black Ritual* by New Lafayette’s artistic director Robert Macbeth conversely presented neo-African mythic ideas, which were strongly influenced by Maulana Karenga’s Kawaïda philosophy.

Bullins’s proclivity for putting simultaneously sympathetic and ridiculous marginal characters from the lower depths of black communities at the center of his plays made it hard to pin down exactly what his stance was toward those characters or even, as seen in his controversial play, *We Righteous Bombers* (1969), toward the Black Power and Black Arts movements themselves.

There was also a considerable segment of the Black Arts theater movement that was oriented toward narrative storytelling in a more realist mode – a mode that tended to be more popular among broader black audiences than ritual drama. Ron Milner (1938–2004), perhaps the best-known Black Arts

playwright besides Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, began his career composing short stories and dramatic sketches with the desire to give voice to the people of his black working-class community in Detroit. That sort of storytelling angle, as in *Who's Got His Own* (1966) and *What the Wine-Sellers Buy* (1973), expressed through renderings of black male coming-of-age narratives, was a hallmark of his mature work. If the New Lafayette Theatre and the National Black Theatre were the champions of ritual theater, such troupes as Concept East Theatre, among whose founders were Milner and his longtime friend Woodie King, and King's New Federal Theatre in New York, promoted narrative Black Arts drama.

Some black playwrights and theaters of the 1960s and 1970s are not easily classifiable. Amiri Baraka was one of the forerunners of the ritual approach to drama, creating black myths in such plays as *Madheart* (1967) and *A Black Mass* (1966). At the same time, a strong satiric strain runs through many of Baraka's Black Arts plays, as well as a deep engagement with popular culture. While ritual drama never really drew a large black audience, Baraka's 1965 *Jello*, a sort of takeoff on the old Jack Benny show, and *A Black Mass*, taking Elijah Muhammad's vision of white people as a creation of a black mad scientist Yakub/Jacoub and making it into a myth/monster movie-influenced play, made a big impact because they were often hilarious or resonated with popular culture consumed by a mass audience in a way much ritual theater did not. Further, Sonia Sanchez in such plays as *Sister Son/ji* and *The Bronx Is Next*, both produced in 1970, mixed the mythic with the narrative.

The importance of drama to the Black Arts Movement extended beyond the actual plays and performances. Theater was central to Black Arts institutions that reached out and were visible to the broader black community, such as New York's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS), New Lafayette Theatre, New Federal Theatre, and National Black Theater; Los Angeles's Watts Theater; Chicago's Kuumba Workshop and ETA; Atlanta's Black Image Theater; Detroit's Concept East Theatre; New Orleans's Free Southern Theater, BLKARTSOUTH, and Dashiki Theater; San Francisco's Black Arts West; Seattle's Black Arts West Theater; and Miami's Theatre of Afro-Arts – to name only a handful of the many, many theaters that sprang up in every community and on every campus with a sizeable number of African Americans. Even for those who never attended a single play, theater marquees, flyers announcing performances pasted up on walls, and theater reviews in African American newspapers were often the most visible face of Black Arts.

These theater institutions provided more continuity between the movement and contemporary African American artistic production than perhaps

any other genre or medium. Many of these theaters survived decades beyond the 1960s and 1970s – and in some cases still exist today. Many artists who emerged from Black Arts theaters, such as playwrights Ntozake Shange, Pearl Cleage, August Wilson (1945–2005), and Charles Fuller and actors Danny Glover, Bill Nunn, and Andrea Frye, achieved national recognition and promoted the values and the aesthetics of Black Arts.

The Black Arts Movement was in many respects a remarkably decentralized political and cultural movement. Certainly, earlier and later artistic movements were often far more widely ranging geographically than the names that we have given them. The Harlem Renaissance, for example, was in fact part of larger networks of artists, activists, and audiences rooted in black communities across the United States with long foregrounds. Similarly, an expansive, interconnected grouping of activists, journals, theaters, study groups, writers' and artists' workshops, presses, schools, and so on comprised what is now viewed as Black Arts. Each of the locales and regions that fueled the artistic creations and activities associated with Black Arts had its own peculiar history, traditions, demographics, dynamic personalities, institutions, and so on, that gave the overall movement a distinct character. The widely dispersed participants of the movement became increasingly directly linked to each other through such national or regional organizations such as the Congress of African People (CAP), the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), and the Southern Black Cultural Alliance (SBCA); systems of political, spiritual, and social philosophy, such as Maulana Karenga's Kawaïda principles; and regional and national meetings of artists and activists, such as the Fisk Negro Writers' Conventions of 1966, 1967, and 1968, the Detroit Black Arts Conventions of 1967 and 1968, the Philadelphia Black Power Conference in 1968, the first CAP convention in Atlanta in 1970, and the National Black Political Convention in Gary in 1972. Also, the Black Arts and Black Power activists of the 1960s and 1970s were not *tabulae rasae* starting from square one in building these national links. Earlier and often overlapping political, educational, and cultural networks and institutions, which reached back to the Reconstruction era if not before in some cases, provided circuits of communication and influence between different moments of black political production. Local conditions, local history, local traditions, local institutions, the size of the black community, and so forth, influenced and shaped the particular ways that Black Arts manifested itself in any specific place.

One might also say that there were certain common biorhythms of growth, decline, and renewal throughout the movement's existence – though the timeline varied somewhat from region to region and place to place. In general,

one can see the beginnings of the movement in the 1961–65/66 period, growing out of older radical traditions as well as the new moment of Civil Rights and decolonization. This was often followed by an initial decline caused by various sorts of internal conflicts as well as external pressures that in turn were replaced by a new wave of institutions increasingly connected to national Black Power organizations such as CAP and ALSC. Again, these were followed by more conflict and pressure in the middle 1970s that caused the movement to decline. Still, even though such major Black Arts and Black Power institutions and organizations, such as CAP, ALSC, the SBCA, the New Lafayette Theatre in New York, the journal *Black World* in Chicago, the *Journal of Black Poetry* (later *Kitabu Cha Jua*) in San Francisco, and Broadside Press in Detroit, had all basically ceased to function by the early 1980s, others, such as the ETA theater, Third World Press, and OBAC in Chicago, the National Black Theatre and the New Federal Theatre in New York, the National Center of Afro-American Artists and its museum in Boston, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia continued to operate beyond what many think of as the endpoint of the Black Arts Movement (around 1976), influencing the production of African American art and inspiring the creation of new forms of globalized, diasporic black arts.

Reform and revolution: the Black Aesthetic at work: the geography of black art

New York City has weighed heavily in almost every account of arts movements in the United States since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. This is, no doubt, for good reason since New York became, with the exception of film and to some extent television, the undisputed capital of so-called high culture and popular culture industries in the United States: theater, publishing, music publishing, recording, radio, dance, Euro-American art music, and jazz and swing. And, if, as Raymond Williams asserts, modernism was substantially the product of the movement of many millions of people from the agricultural peripheries to the industrial and commercial centers of the capitalist world, then New York with its polyglot population was the modernist city par excellence.

While African Americans would never come to demographically dominate New York in the way that they would Newark, Gary, or East St. Louis, the migration of hundreds of thousands of black people from the South and tens of thousands from the Caribbean would still give New York City the largest urban concentration of people of African descent in the United States, if not the world, by the early twentieth century. One reason why Harlem retained its position of a politically and culturally cutting-edge community was the increased engagement of black artists and activists with organized leftists, especially the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). Among activists and artists, there was a devotion to “Negro Liberation” and the idea that African Americans comprised a nation or national minority. They also believed in the existence and vitality of black national culture that needed to be promoted, especially in its more proletarian aspects, as an expression of African American ideas and identity and as a weapon against national and class exploitation. Organizers and publishers expended much energy and resources promoting, supporting, and recruiting African American artists and intellectuals sympathetic to these interests.

This era was also a period of continued nationalist activity in Harlem, generally by individuals and groups descended from the Garvey movement. These nationalists, like the Communists, were a constant presence on the streets of Harlem, preaching from ladders and soap boxes the need for black self-determination and separate black development, and the need to learn black history and black pride. Nationalists, along with leftists, were key in

campaigns against police brutality and for the hiring of African Americans in white-owned community businesses that had long excluded black people from jobs or hired them only in the most menial capacity. While leftists and the nationalists were often at odds, they frequently came together in sorts of ad hoc alliances around these issues. Much the same could be said about competing leftist groups and leaders. For example, the Socialist A. Phillip Randolph might denounce the Communists but still worked with them on various issues of concern to black people in New York and across the nation. While nationalists were and remained an important presence in Harlem and other black communities across the United States, they rarely built the sort of political, cultural, and educational institutions as did the sort of neighborhood-based, door to door grassroots organizing that characterized much of the work of the Communist Left – at least after the decline of the Garvey movement in the 1920s. There were some important exceptions, however. The Nation of Islam, especially when the dynamic young Malcolm X came to New York in 1954 to lead Harlem's Mosque Number 7, the National Memorial African Bookstore of Lewis Michaux, and the Frederick Douglass Bookstore of Richard Moore (also a former Communist who remained friendly with the CPUSA until his death) were crucial institutions in the development of Black Arts and Black Power in New York.

One result of the Cold War was that political discourse was much constrained. As Penny von Eschen and others have noted, liberal Civil Rights organizations that had regularly attacked imperialism and colonialism in the late 1940s, such as the NAACP, became very reticent to do so because such sentiments were seen as too "Red." Civil Rights organizations and leaders, and politicians supporting black civil rights, often had to go to great lengths to distance themselves from past leftist connections and current activists and organizations deemed too far to the Left, or positions that were soft on Communism.²⁴ Even the nationalists, who were often quite anti-Communist, as Lorenzo Thomas points out, often found themselves the victims of a sort of McCarthyism that stigmatized them as "weird" or "un-American."²⁵

Another crucial element for the development of the early Black Arts Movement in New York was the emergence of a multiracial downtown artistic bohemia centered in the Lower East Side (and to some degree Greenwich Village). Of course, African Americans had participated in the artistic bohemias of New York since the beginning of the twentieth century – and, in fact, a willingness to violate proscriptive notions of the color line had long been a mark of US bohemia in New York and elsewhere, however racist, patronizing, or insensitive white bohemians might be in many respects. Black artists such as

Richard Wright, Beaufort Delaney (1901–79), James Baldwin, and Harold Cruse had lived in the Village before the emergence of the Lower East Side as the locus of the new bohemia, if not always comfortably. However, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Lower East Side, especially that area east of Cooper Square between Houston Street and 14th Street soon to be known as the East Village, became the home of many younger black writers, theater workers, musicians, visual artists, dancers, and intellectuals – far more so than Harlem. Even those young artists like Lorenzo Thomas and Sonia Sanchez who continued to live in predominantly (or almost entirely) black neighborhoods focused much of their artistic activity and networking downtown.

In many respects, 1961 was a pivotal year for what might be thought of as the prehistory of the Black Arts Movement in New York. That year saw the growth of a number of crucial black Left and nationalist (and in many respects Left-nationalist) institutions that would do much to shape the trajectory of Black Arts, combining in many respects the black Left proclivity for institution building with more overtly nationalist ideology. Two new journals, *Freedomways* and *Liberator*, were founded in New York by black radicals who came largely out of the cultural and political circuits of the Old Left. *Freedomways* was to a large extent the realization of the efforts of Ed Strong and Louis Burnham to create a cultural and political journal that would showcase the work of older socially engaged artists while encouraging the development of younger artists and intellectuals within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, decolonization, and the rise of the anti-imperialist Non-Aligned movement epitomized by the Bandung Conference of 1955. Both Strong and Burnham died before the journal actually appeared, but they did gather together the core of activists that would sustain *Freedomways* until the 1980s, including the managing editor, Esther Cooper Jackson (former editor of the CPUSA's newspaper *The Worker* and leader of the Southern Negro Youth Congress), the first editor Shirley Graham Du Bois (who did much of her early editorial work as an expatriate in Ghana), W. E. B. Du Bois, and the nationalist John Henrik Clarke. While *Freedomways* never became a nationalist journal and retained its close ties to the Communist Left throughout its existence, it was open to many nationalist writers like Askia Touré (Rolland Snellings) and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) and resolutely maintained its status as a journal entirely run by African Americans. As was the case with many older black artists and intellectuals with roots in the Old Left, like John O. Killens, Langston Hughes, and Margaret Burroughs, it provided critical support for the Black Arts and Black Power movements, often criticizing a lack of historical perspective and appreciation of earlier generations of black cultural

and political radicals on the part of some the younger militants, while encouraging not only young black writers, but also visual artists like Tom Feelings (1933–2003) (also an expatriate in Nkrumah's Ghana for a time) with extended portfolios of their work. There was also considerable commentary on other forms of African American culture, particularly music and theater, as well as vital coverage of a huge number of books by black authors in a column by Ernest Kaiser (1916–2006), renowned librarian at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library), who was of singular importance for readers attempting to keep track of the new black literature.

Liberator, another journal with strong ties to the Old Left, was also a crucial institution for the growth of Black Arts. The journal at first focused on the liberation movements of Africa, but increasingly became concerned with black liberation in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora. While its politics were never completely consistent, to a large degree it moved away from its original roots in the Old Left and more toward a new nationalism critical of accommodationism, integrationism, and non-violent protest (often seen as epitomized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [1929–68]). Importantly for the Black Arts Movement, it became a vehicle not only for poetry in the early 1960s, but also for important essays and reviews by Askia Touré, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Clayton Riley (1935–2008), James Stewart, and others that did much to define the field in which the Black Arts Movement would emerge.

The next few years saw a proliferation of black cultural groups with a strong interest in politics and political groups with a strong interest in culture – in many respects reprising a similar intersection of the political and the cultural during the extended Popular Front era of the 1930s and 1940s. Tom Dent (1932–98), a young poet from New Orleans whose father was the president of Dillard University and who had worked for the NAACP and the *New York Age*, initiated the Umbra Poets' Workshop in 1962 as a way to bring together and develop the work of young black writers, including David Henderson, Calvin Hernton (1932–2001), Ishmael Reed, Lorenzo Thomas, and Askia Touré. These writers primarily lived on the Lower East Side – though a number of them had met at the Marketplace Gallery poetry readings in Harlem organized by Raymond Patterson (1929–2001) in the late 1950s. Though primarily oriented toward the development and promotion of the work of its members and guests in the sort of workshop that characterized much early Black Arts and proto-Black Arts activity, as well as in its journal *Umbra*, the group also displayed a strong, if not coherent, social interest inflected by older and newer Left and nationalist currents, from the Garveyites to the Nation of Islam to Robert Williams to the CPUSA to the

Progressive Labor Party (the “anti-revisionist” and later “Maoist” group that split from the CPUSA in the early 1960s).

The aesthetics of Umbra were also not unified, but could be generally seen as consonant with downtown avant-garde or “New American Poetry” tendencies, but with a pronounced interest taking them in an African American direction – and recalling the degree to which these tendencies had been influenced by black traditions and black artists, like Langston Hughes. It is worth noting that Hughes, like Jacob Lawrence for the young visual artists, not only served as a role model for a number of these emerging writers, but actively encouraged and supported them. Tom Dent and a number of the Umbra writers also had close relationships with the staff at *Freedomways*, particularly Esther Cooper Jackson and Jean Carey Bond.

The 1963 March on Washington was also an electrifying event for the mobilization and participation of many thousands of black people. An Umbra contingent traveled to the march, as did a new Greenwich Village-based group of visual artists, Spiral, which had formed precisely for this purpose. Spiral included such older artists as Charles Alston (1907–77), Romare Bearden (1911–88), Hale Woodruff (1900–80), and Norman Lewis (1909–79), many veterans of the Popular Front during the heyday of the Left in Harlem, and such younger artists as Felrath Hines, Richard Mayhew, William Pritchard, Emma Amos, Richard Gammon, and Alvin Holingsworth. As with Umbra, the politics and aesthetics of the Spiral members varied considerably, but it was a place where work could be discussed and critiqued within the context of larger aesthetic and political discussion, anticipating the visual arts collectives of the Black Arts Movement, such as the Visual Arts Workshop of Chicago’s OBAC, which eventually morphed into AFRI-COBRA.

The proximity of New York City to various other centers of black populations, cultural institutions, and political activity made the Northeast a dynamic hub for developing the idea of a Black Arts Movement and for the creation of a Black Arts cadre. The relatively short geographical distances allowed for easy travel of artists and activists back and forth between these centers. In fact, in these other centers, especially Philadelphia and Boston, radical black artists and cultural organizations and institutions were often more rooted in black neighborhoods than was the case in New York. In Boston, for instance, despite the relatively small size of the African American community, the chief locus of Black Arts activity became the Elma Lewis School for the Arts. While the inspiration for the school and its later offshoots may have come from Chicago, these institutions also maintained a close relationship with black artists in New York, especially in music, theater, and dance.

The connection between New York and Philadelphia was even more productive in terms of Black Arts and Black Power than that between New York and Boston. Like New York, Philadelphia too had a long history of black radical and nationalist activity dating back to the nineteenth century. Philadelphia became a crucial transmission point between the black communities of the North and the Civil Rights Movement of the South. Not only did SNCC maintain an office there, but the city also became a sort of refuge for radical black Southerners forced to relocate because of political repression. Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford) was the pivotal figure in making Philadelphia a center of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). Like many early Black Power groups, RAM's politics are a little hard to characterize specifically, but it can be described as a Left-nationalist cadre group in which the members did not so much try to create a mass organization as influence other groups. One of the most significant things about RAM for the Black Arts Movement is the interest it showed from the beginning in black artists' organization. Ahmad, for example, had studied art at Central State University, where RAM had its beginnings, and initially saw himself primarily as a painter. A number of the most important Black Arts activists, including Larry Neal and Askia Touré, were members of the group, and some of the most important journals, especially *Soul Book* and *Liberator*, and institutions, particularly BARTS, were deeply influenced by RAM.

Neal became the moving force behind a study group of politicized black artists, the West Philadelphia-based Muntu group, which also included the playwright Charles Fuller and the musician and visual artist James Stewart. The name came from the title of the 1961 book *Muntu* (derived from a Bantu word meaning "man") by leading Africanist Janheinz Jahn. The group ascribed to the belief they took from Jahn's book: that it would be possible for the newly independent nations of Africa to modernize without adopting European and North American cultural values, systems of economic organization, political principles, and so on. In addition to Jahn's book, the Muntu group delved into a wide range of radical and nationalist texts on politics, culture, religion, and art from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. In particular, the Muntu activists argued that a sort of rhythm, which was both physical and spiritual, underlay and unified African and diasporic culture, a rhythm that the members of the group tried to translate into their art. The members of the group were crucial in bringing to the Black Arts Movement on the East Coast a leftist sensibility that drew on various sorts of radical traditions, including Marxist political critiques of capitalism, while pointing out what they saw as the traditional Left's neglect of the spiritual dimension

essential to the African tradition, in some respects anticipating and paving the way for the later influence of Maulana Karenga's Kawaïda philosophy.

Following the murder of Malcolm X in 1965, Ahmad suggested to Amiri Baraka that a proper response to the killing would be the establishment of a radical black cultural group. This advice provided part of the motivation for Baraka to join with other African American artists uptown in Harlem to form BARTS, which as the name suggests combined workshops in a range of artistic genres, classes and informal discussions of politics, philosophy and performances of poetry, plays, music and other artistic genres in a variety of spaces as well as on the streets. The artists and intellectuals who joined in BARTS did not adhere to a single political ideology, characteristic of the kind of aesthetic and ideological eclecticism of many early Black Arts initiatives. While this lent a considerable air of excitement and possibility, at the same time the lack of coherence made for frequent in-fighting and internal tensions that did much to destroy the organization.

After the collapse of BARTS and the departure of many of its key figures for elsewhere in the United States – Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Askia Touré were among those who left – Black Arts in New York was at a relatively low ebb. While black artistic production remained vital in New York, such as Woodie King's Mobilization for Youth drama workshop that evolved into the New Federal Theatre, Harlem declined as a center of the Black Arts Movement. However, within a couple of years there was a resurgence of Black Arts institutions in Harlem and new growth in the other boroughs of the city, especially Brooklyn. In part, this revival was promoted by the availability of private foundation money on a new level, resulting in the founding of such institutions as the New Lafayette Theatre, headed by Robert Macbeth with Ed Bullins as playwright-in-residence, and the Studio Museum in Harlem in which Edward Spriggs played a key role.

In addition to these high-profile institutions, a vibrant loft scene grew up in Harlem centered in the Fifth Avenue and 125th area that included the National Black Theatre, the Studio Museum, the Open Mind, and the Last Poets' East Wind. Quite a bit of the new energy in Harlem was caused by the return east of such expatriates as Sonia Sanchez and Askia Touré, with Amiri Baraka nearby in his hometown of Newark, New Jersey. The Harlem poetry scene that flourished in these lofts in the late 1960s and early 1970s featured such artists as the Last Poets, Touré, Larry Neal, Marvin X, and Nikki Giovanni, though she actually lived in the nearby Upper Westside. Some post-BARTS Harlem institutions founded in 1967 and 1968, such as the National Black Theatre, Liberation Books, and the Studio Museum, survived far beyond the end of the Black Arts era.

Some early East Coast anthologies were also critical in promoting the idea of a new national African American arts movement. While *Black Fire* (1968) owed much of its conception, terminology, and inspiration to BARTS, Clarence Major's *The New Black Poetry* (1969), issued by the CPUSA's International Publishers, was another key anthology conceived in a New York Black Arts-Communist Left matrix – key in terms of presenting both a wide range of black poetry and a rallying point for those, such as Edward Spriggs and Askia Touré, who called for black poets to publish with African American presses rather than white publishers.

Even as Black Arts revived in Harlem, a new center was established in central Brooklyn. The linchpin of Brooklyn was The East, an educational and arts center founded in the summer of 1969 by Jitu Weusi (Les Campbell) and other activists of the African American Students Association. The East and its offshoot, The Far East, in St. Albans, Queens, featured performances by many of the leading young jazz avant-gardists of the period such as Rashid Ali, Milford Graves, Gary Bartz, and Andrew Cyrille, as well as drama, dance, poetry, film festivals, night classes, and political meetings of such groups as the Republic of New Africa and Nat's Women, a local nationalist women's group. While the National Black Theatre and the other spaces of the Harlem loft scene fulfilled many of these functions, there was no single space in Harlem that could rival The East. Central Brooklyn (and The East) was also the home of *Black News*, an offset biweekly nationalist newspaper with sophisticated graphics and block print covers. With a circulation of about 10,000, *Black News* featured much poetry by local writers, especially high school and junior high school students, and nationally known writers, such as Haki Madhubuti and Mari Evans. As with The East, no nationalist Harlem-based newspaper or journal came close to matching *Black News* in circulation during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, central Brooklyn in that period was a hotbed of Black Arts/Black Power theatrical performances, concerts, poetry readings, night classes, lectures, independent schools, demonstrations, rallies, political meetings, and so on.

Nearby in New Jersey, Amiri Baraka's return to his native Newark after the dissolution of BARTS led to a considerable increase in Black Arts activity, which already included the community jazz club The Cellar and the Jazz Society in which poet and dancer Sylvia Robinson (who would become Amina Baraka) was among the most involved. Amiri and Amina Baraka became the guiding force behind the establishment of Spirit House, a community arts and theater center in Newark's Central Ward modeled on BARTS. They also established a publishing company, Jihad Productions, that, while not on the level of Broadside Press or Third World Press, put a number of important books, pamphlets,

and recordings into circulation. During this period, Baraka, along with Larry Neal and A. B. Spellman, established a music journal, *The Cricket*, dealing primarily but not exclusively with jazz, that aimed to establish a radical black alternative to “mainstream” institutions of jazz criticism, such as *Downbeat*, as well as more “alternative,” but white-dominated venues such as the *Village Voice*.

Other large and mid-sized Northeastern cities saw an upsurge in community-based Black Arts efforts. Boston’s Elma Lewis (1921–2004) founded the National Center of Afro-American Artists in 1968 and the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) in 1969. These institutions along with her already existing school, and the events associated with them such as the annual performance of Langston Hughes’s *Black Nativity* (1961), not only formed the heart of the Black Arts Movement in Boston, but also put on nationally significant shows of art, despite persistent funding problems. While the school eventually closed, both the NCAAA and its museum continue to exist. Many smaller New England cities saw a growth of community-based Black Arts institutions, such as musician Jackie McLean’s Artists’ Collective, co-founded with his wife Dollie in Hartford, Connecticut in 1970, and the dozens of murals painted in Springfield, Massachusetts through a program funded by anti-poverty money.

Philadelphia, too, was much moved by the spirit of creating durable black cultural and educational institutions. While some of the early local Black Arts activists, such as Larry Neal and Muhammad Ahmad, moved elsewhere, often to New York City at least for a time, many others, including Neal’s colleagues from the Muntu group Charles Fuller and James Stewart, remained and helped organize a rapidly increasing number of theaters, readings, and concerts. In part because of it being a center of RAM, Philadelphia was the site of the third annual Black Power Conference in 1968. The conference took place at the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia, which had been opened up to a wide range of Black Power and Black Arts organizations by its rector, Father Paul Washington. The Church of the Advocate continued to be a hotbed of Black Arts events, including the painting of a set of enormous murals by Philadelphia visual artists Walter Edmonds and Richard Watson in the early and middle 1970s. Efforts to create a black museum in the city that ultimately culminated in the establishment of the African American Museum in 1976 became a focal point for Black Arts activities. Even before the museum was formally inaugurated, the committee organizing the museum sponsored many arts initiatives, including the publication of the chapbook *Black Poets Write On* (1970) that introduced the work of younger and lesser-known Philadelphia writers, including the poet and journalist James Spady.

The Midwest, especially Chicago and Detroit, was the home of many of the most enduring and arguably the most important institutions of the movement. The movement in the Midwest, particularly in Chicago, was also marked by the sheer vitality of the work done in so many artistic disciplines and genres. As in New York, black artistic production in the Midwest had a long history. Certainly, Midwestern cities, such as Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Detroit, had distinguished histories as centers of black vernacular music reaching back to the ragtime era and up into modern blues, gospel, R&B, and jazz – often, as elsewhere, through music publishing companies and recording companies controlled by white people, but also in companies run by African Americans – most famously Motown in Detroit and Vee-Jay in Gary, Indiana.

In Chicago, the Afro-American Heritage Association, founded in the 1950s by Ishmael Flory, Facing Reality's newspaper *Correspondence* founded in 1951, and the Ebony Museum (later the Du Sable Museum) established by Charles and Margaret Burroughs in 1961, prepared much of the ground for the Black Arts Movement in the Midwest, serving as inspiration, meeting place, and apprenticeship for many young black political and cultural activists. Margaret Danner (1915–84) founded Boone House, a meeting place for black writers, particularly poets, in 1962 during a sojourn as a writer-in-residence at Wayne State University in Detroit. Some of the important Black Arts figures that passed through these institutions and/or were promoted by them included Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randall, Ron Milner, and Woodie King. For example, not only did Charles and Margaret Burroughs mentor the young Madhubuti, but Margaret Burroughs encouraged him more directly: the Ebony Museum was founded to publish and promote Haki's first book of poetry *Think Black* in 1966.

However, the most important institution promoting Black Arts and Black Power in Chicago, the region, and ultimately the United States came with the establishment of *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*) by Johnson Publishing (publishers of *Jet* and *Ebony*), employing as its editor Hoyt Fuller, a veteran of black journalism in Detroit and Chicago, who had traveled widely in Europe and Africa. While John H. Johnson had envisioned *Negro Digest* as a sort of black version of *Reader's Digest*, Fuller's general mission was to create a cultural, intellectual and political journal supporting the more militant end of Civil Rights. *Negro Digest/Black World* was internationalist, anticolonialist, and increasingly nationalist.

The publication also had a more local mission to celebrate and encourage new black art and artistic production in the Midwest, particularly the cities of

Detroit and Chicago to which Fuller had close personal ties. Thus, Fuller included the work of older Chicago artists and cultural activists with roots in the Popular Front milieu of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Margaret Burroughs and Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks was by then the most celebrated black poet of Chicago – and perhaps the most celebrated living Chicago poet period, having won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. Burroughs was almost a persona non grata in “mainstream” publications for her unrepentantly left-wing politics, so her appearance in *Negro Digest* was an important breach of Cold War censorship. However, Fuller also promoted the work of younger and not so young black artists, such as the group of writers associated with Boone House and other Detroit literary and theatrical circles, the so-called “Detroit Group” that included Margaret Danner, Oliver LaGronne, Naomi Long Madgett, Dudley Randall, and to some degree Ron Milner and Woodie King, Jr. Of course, many of these Detroit artists had long ties to Fuller. Both Danner and Fuller had been active in a Chicago arts group, Art Associates, which Danner established in Chicago in the 1960s, and Randall and Fuller knew each other from their days at Wayne State University in Detroit. While most of the Detroit poets, with the possible exception of Randall, Ron Milner, and Woodie King, did not ultimately attain the same level of attention of many of the younger Chicago poets who would emerge over the next few years, Fuller was able to use the Detroit Group as an example of a dynamic locus of a new black art that could be imitated in other cities, in the region, and across the nation.

The most significant institution that emerged out of the Detroit Group as far as the development of the national Black Arts Movement was concerned was Detroit’s Broadside Press. Broadside was founded by poet and librarian Dudley Randall in 1965 and initially run out of his house. Its first offerings were a series of broadsides issued under the title “Poems of Negro Revolt,” including poems by Randall, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, and Margaret Walker – all older poets with roots in the Popular Front of the Midwest. Broadside began its books series in the next year with *Poem/Counterpoem* by Randall and Margaret Danner. Though production and editing problems kept the anthology *For Malcolm* from appearing until 1969, it was extremely important in terms of bringing older writers like Burroughs and Walker together with younger writers like Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti. Broadside became the premiere black-run publisher of African American poetry and criticism during the Black Arts era, publishing dozens of titles, especially younger writers, and putting more than a half a million volumes into circulation, and inspiring other Black Arts presses, especially Third World Press in Chicago.

If 1961 was a turning point in the development of the cultural and political field for the evolution of Black Arts and Black Power, 1967 was another such year for the movement in the Midwest, especially Chicago. By the end of the year, Chicago was arguably the most dynamic Black Arts locus during a time when much valuable work was going on in many places. Two key developments for the Black Arts Movement in Chicago and the region generally were the establishment of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) by Hoyt Fuller, Conrad Kent Rivers (1933–68), and Abdul Alkalimat (Gerald McWhorter) and the first meetings of Gwendolyn Brooks’s writers’ workshop, both in 1967.

While the trio that founded OBAC seem to have envisioned an interdisciplinary group that would broadly discuss and promote the creation of a new black art closely related to the new and growing militant currents of black politics and nationalist thought, much like the art Fuller supported in *Negro Digest*, two more narrowly focused subgroups quickly formed, the Writers’ Workshop and the Visual Arts Workshop. The Writers’ Workshop included such upcoming Black Arts luminaries as Haki Madhubuti, Carolyn Rodgers, Johari Amini (Jewel Latimore), Amus Mor, Angela Jackson, and Ebon Dooley (1942–2006). The workshop, much like Umbra, the Watts’ Writers Workshop, Boone House, and the Harlem Writers’ Guild, served as a place where writers, especially poets, learned their craft, reading their works and benefiting from critical feedback that focused on both aesthetics and ideology. It was also a place where artists networked both with local Chicago artists and with visiting out-of-town black writers for whom it became an essential stop. *Nommo*, OBAC’s somewhat irregularly appearing journal, publicized the work of its members to the larger community.

Encouraged by Oscar Brown Jr., Gwendolyn Brooks organized a poetry workshop that included many of the OBAC writers, initially aimed at members of the Blackstone Rangers, the preeminent street gang of the South Side. Brooks hoped to give these young men a chance to learn the craft of poetry and articulate their feelings and concerns in new ways without being patronizing. Soon young black poets and aspiring poets from across the city attended the workshop, most importantly Haki Madhubuti, who became especially close to Brooks. In turn, Brooks became inspired by these militant young artists, setting the stage for her famous “conversion” to the Black Arts Movement at the 1967 Fisk Writers’ Conference.

The OBAC Visual Arts Workshop also formed shortly after the founding of the umbrella group to address the particular disciplinary concerns of the visual artists. However, the Writers’ Workshop and the Visual Arts Workshop

interacted with those working in other disciplines (and across disciplines), both inside and outside OBAC, to produce, for example, the famous collective work of the Visual Arts Workshop, the 1967 mural *The Wall of Respect*. The mural, painted by more than a dozen artists, was essentially a wall of black social, cultural, political, and artistic heroes, some national and others more closely tied to Chicago and the Midwest.

Another critical Black Arts institutional mainstay was inaugurated in 1967, Third World Press. That year Haki Madhubuti would publish his second book, *Black Pride* (1968), with Broadside Press. Randall, who ran the press out of his house, inspired Madhubuti, who was already aware of the work of Margaret and Charles Burroughs at the Ebony Museum. Committed to this kind of institution-building in Chicago, he, Carolyn Rodgers, and Johari Amini, started Third World Press in his apartment. Third World initially differed from Broadside by attracting younger writers and having a broader focus, eventually publishing titles in fiction, criticism, philosophy, religion, and politics as well as in poetry. The presses enjoyed a mutual relationship. For example, Broadside published some of Madhubuti's most widely circulated collections of poetry while Third World issued such collections as Randall's *More to Remember* (1971) and *After the Killing* (1973). Naomi Long Madgett's founding of Lotus Press in Detroit added a third press that would help to document the physical record of Black Arts literature.

A fortuitous 1967 event was the hiring of the seminal black folklorist, choreographer, and dancer Katherine Dunham to the faculty of Southern Illinois University. During her time at Southern Illinois University, Dunham became increasingly involved in the cultural activities and politics of the largely African American city of East St. Louis, where she established the Katherine Dunham's Performing Arts Center founded in 1969. Dunham provided an important site for black performance and the training of local black artists. As she mentored black artists and activists across the United States and beyond, she drew on her rich history as an innovator, performer and anthropologist of black dance, having done extensive research in Haiti and Africa in the thirties as a student at the University of Chicago. One of those she helped mentor, Eugene Redmond, went on to become a prolific poet, critic, publisher, and educator, not only in the St. Louis region, but far beyond, producing among other things the 1976 *Drumvoices*, still the only literary history that seriously attempts to survey the full sweep of African American poetry with a great sensitivity to historical and geographical details.

Cleveland, too, was for a considerable time an important political and cultural transmission point between regions. It was the home of *Free Lance*,

one of the few literary journals in which African Americans set editorial policy and practically the only one that was sympathetic to formally and politically radical work during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was also the chief base of the experimental poet, critic, and composer Russell Atkins, who referred to himself as a “Nationalistic Phenomenalist.” In addition to providing some of the most formally adventurous poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, Atkins provided a theoretical scaffolding for the Black Arts Movement by arguing for a black avant-garde tradition descending from the work of Langston Hughes. *Free Lance* also published the work of a number of poets associated with Black Arts in the Midwest, such as Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randall, and Conrad Kent Rivers.

Cleveland was also home for Donald Freeman, who was one of the early initiators and chief theorists of RAM. Through his correspondence, lectures, publications, and organizing tours, Freeman made Cleveland a significant point of connection for the circulation of ideas and information between Black Power/Black Arts from New York and Philadelphia and those in the Bay Area. Like the South Side Arts Center in Chicago, Cleveland’s long-standing Karamu House took on a new cast during the Black Power and Black Arts movements – though much of the student body continued to be white. It made cutting-edge new black drama, visual arts, music, and literature available to local audiences. The most prominent of the Cleveland-based Black Arts writers associated with Karamu House was the poet-dramatist Norman Jordan. A sort of writer-in-residence, Jordan was also the guiding force behind Vibrations Press, and worked closely with Donald and Norma Freeman on the cultural journal *Vibration*.

Like other urban areas with large black populations, Los Angeles and the cities of the San Francisco Bay Area had a considerable history of radical African American activity, especially in the 1940s when there was a huge immigration of African Americans from the South, from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, to work in the burgeoning war industries of the West Coast. Though the black community then was relatively small, Los Angeles’s Garveyite activity dated back to the 1920s. Later, the Los Angeles-based *California Eagle* under the direction of its publisher and managing editor Charlotta Bass was, along with the Baltimore *Afro-American* and the *People’s Voice*, among the most openly Left-influenced African American newspapers in the United States in the 1940s. In the Bay Area, Carlton Goodlett’s *Sun-Reporter*, the premiere Bay Area black newspaper by the 1940s, also showed a discernible, if somewhat idiosyncratic Left influence. The Civil Rights Congress was also strong both in southern California, especially Los

Angeles, and in San Francisco and the cities of the East Bay during the 1940s and early 1950s.

In the early 1960s, nationalism surged in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. It was most strongly influenced by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as well as by the militant advocacy of black self-determination and armed self-defense of Robert Williams, the North Carolina activist who had become well known for promoting that black people adopt armed self-defense. The most influential California-based nationalist group of this period was the Afro-American Association (AAA). Members from this group were some of the most important cultural nationalist and revolutionary nationalist leaders of the West Coast, leaders who would often be at odds with each other later. The AAA evolved out of a study group organized by black graduate and law students at the University of California-Berkeley. Much like their East Coast counterparts in On Guard and the Monroe Defense Committee, it was the persecution, flight, and exile of Robert Williams that prompted the group's move toward a more activist identity. The group led demonstrations and street rallies in support of Williams in the black communities of San Francisco and Oakland, introducing the old Harlem and South Side style of Left and nationalist soapbox/ladder speakers to the Bay Area.

Several interrelated, though sometimes conflicting, groups and institutions of Black Arts and Black Power that went on to have a national impact grew out of the AAA. The journals *Soulbook* and *Black Dialogue* were started by members of a study group that broke away from the AAA. To an even greater extent than *Liberator* and *Freedomways* on the East Coast, *Soulbook* and *Black Dialogue* on the West represented efforts by young black activists, artists, and intellectuals to begin a national dialogue about culture and politics without waiting for the direction or approval of more established black leaders – though, as elsewhere, the journals showed a great interest in history, tradition, and ancestors. Some of the early leaders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), notably Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, had belonged to the AAA. In Los Angeles, Maulana Karenga, the chief ideological and organizational force in the USA and the Kawaida movement, had been the leader of the AAA in Los Angeles. Marvin X crossed the San Francisco Bay to become active in the student movement and the black cultural scene of San Francisco State College and the Fillmore District that produced both the Black Students Union and Black Arts West, a performance group initiated by Marvin X and playwright Ed Bullins, inspired by local political and cultural activity as well as by the example of BARTS in New York, in 1966. Another important journal, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, emerged more or less out of the same matrix, started

by poet and civil rights activist Dingane Joe Goncalves, the poetry editor of *Black Dialogue*, largely because of the sheer volume of poetry submitted to *Black Dialogue*. The *Journal of Black Poetry* published a wide range of verse and became a vital source for networking and communication as the periodical also published reports and announcements about Black Arts workshops, reading series, journals, and other activities in a burgeoning number of cities and campuses across the United States.

The efforts to establish Black Studies at San Francisco State College were also of importance to the development of the Black Arts Movement in the Bay Area. The campus was a center of progressive and radical student activity for civil rights and against McCarthyism and the increasing escalation of the war in Vietnam in the early and mid 1960s. A bellwether of the new mood on campus was the transformation of the Negro Students Association into the Black Students Association (BSA) in 1966. In that same year, the BSU and its members initiated the beginning of Black Studies in courses taught through the newly formed San Francisco Experimental College. The black student movement at the college drew within its orbit many of the artists and intellectuals connected with Black Arts West, *Black Dialogue*, *Soulbook*, and the *Journal of Black Poetry*, including Ed Bullins, Ed Spriggs, Marvin X, Art Sheridan, and Bobby Seale.

A key factor in the evolution of Black Arts in the Bay Area and ultimately the United States was the recruitment of seminal Black Arts activists from the East Coast escaping from the disruption and conflict attending the breakup of BARTS in New York to work in the emerging San Francisco State Black Studies program – which in the beginning was much more of a movement than a traditional academic program. The first to come west was Sonia Sanchez, who initially taught a tremendously successful non-credit black literature course – followed by similar courses for credit. Her courses were among the first of this type at a college or university in the United States. In 1967, Amiri Baraka and eventually Askia Touré joined Sanchez to found the Black Communications Project (BCP), which not only worked on the San Francisco State College campus but also organized readings and performances in black communities throughout the Bay Area.

It was also through this general circle, particularly Marvin X and the staff at *Black Dialogue*, that a former inmate of Soledad Prison, Eldridge Cleaver (1935–98), was convinced to take some of the money he made from his collection of autobiographical essays, *Soul on Ice* (1968), and finance a black political and cultural center in the Fillmore District, the Black House. For a relatively short period, the Black House was a cultural focal point not only for

the artists of Black Arts West, notably Bullins and Marvin X, but also for the newer arrivals associated with BCP, particularly Sanchez, Baraka, and Touré. In fact, the Black House became a sort of unofficial headquarters for Baraka and the BCP. During this period, Marvin X and Bullins also introduced Cleaver to their longtime acquaintances Bobby Seale and Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, beginning Cleaver's meteoric rise as a Panther leader. Political and personality conflicts between the artists and Cleaver led to the expulsion of the artists from the Black House and further antagonism between many of these artists and the Panthers, especially on the West Coast.

This continued antagonism created an atmosphere that helped prompt departure of many of the artists, including Baraka, Bullins, Marvin X, Sanchez, and Touré, and some of the Black Arts/Black Power institutions, such as *Black Dialogue*, to move elsewhere in the United States, especially the East Coast. Important Black Arts activists and institutions remained in the Bay Area. Dingane Joe Goncalves, who remained distant from the various intra-movement disputes in the Bay Area, continued to publish the *Journal of Black Poetry*. A dynamic scene of African American, Chicana/o, Asian American, and white artists grew up in San Francisco's Mission District with roots in Black Arts and the Chicano Movement and flourished in the 1970s, in many ways anticipating and influencing the more radical end of what would become known as multiculturalism. This incipient multicultural movement was greatly strengthened by novelist and poet Ishmael Reed's move to Berkeley in 1967 and his subsequent relocation to Oakland. Reed's work as an editor, publisher, and cultural organizer with, among other institutions, *Yardbird*, I Reed Books, and the Before Columbus Foundation, was resolutely multicultural – a term that he helped put into common usage.

Perhaps the first African American institution established in Los Angeles that directly anticipated, promoted, and participated in the Black Arts Movement was the Pan-Afrikan Arkestra in 1961. Influenced by Sun Ra and his Arkestra, the Pan-Afrikan Arkestra was one of the first 1960s musical institutions to bring an avant-garde jazz with a strong sense of musical tradition to the community that was as popular as it was aesthetically and politically challenging. Key to the group was the pianist Horace Tapscott, who wanted to revive the *older* black music tradition in the African American neighborhoods in Los Angeles – negatively impacted by the decline of the Central Avenue district and the subsequent loss of most jazz venues – as much as he was inspired by a *new* music associated with a militant Civil Rights Movement, particularly the sit-ins and the rise of SNCC, as well as the

independence struggles in Africa and throughout the colonized world. The Arkestra became a mainstay of Black Arts, Black Power, and other radical political and cultural events in Los Angeles, much like the groups associated with Phil Cohran in Chicago.

The Arkestra and the musical efforts of its successor UGMA (Underground Musicians Association) attracted not only musicians, but also black artists in other disciplines and genres, such as Jayne Cortez, activist-poet and theater worker, thus promoting the multimedia, multigeneric performances that were a hallmark of Black Arts nationwide. Studio Watts was established as another meeting place for community-based artists in 1964, largely through the efforts of a black accountant and arts advocate, James Woods. Cortez led the writing/acting workshop, and Studio Watts had workshops in design, painting and sculpture, and dance. The writer/acting workshop, which performed Jean Genet's *The Blacks* before thousands at the first Watts Festival in 1966, eventually broke away to form the Watts Repertory Theatre in 1967.

Despite these various cultural and political initiatives in southern California during the early and middle 1960s, the event that most transformed Black Arts and Black Power and the national profile of radical African American politics and art in Los Angeles was unquestionably the Watts uprising of 1965. While such uprisings had happened before, especially in 1964, the sheer size and ferocity of the revolt centered in Watts, in what was still considered the "golden land" of California, brought intense national visibility and scrutiny to this indicator of a new mood in the black community. The Watts riots and the uprisings that followed in other cities prompted an enormous increase in various sorts of governmental and private anti-poverty grant money to support existing groups, like Studio Watts, as well as the establishment of new initiatives, like the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, led by visual artists Judson Powell and John Outterbridge, and the Watts Towers Arts Center, directed for a time by the avant-garde assemblage artist Noah Purifoy.

One immediate result was the establishment of the Watts Writers Workshop by white novelist and screenwriter Budd Schulberg, who wanted to do something positive in the aftermath of the Watts uprising. The workshop brought older and younger apprentice authors, some of whom, notably Quincy Troupe, Harry Dolan, and Johnnie Scott, went on to some considerable success as authors and screenwriters. It gained regional and national attention largely through a 1966 NBC documentary, "The Angry Voices of Watts" (directed by Schulberg's brother Stuart), through its high-profile regional readings, and through its publications, especially its 1967 anthology *From the Ashes*, the first Black Arts literary anthology. In 1966, after a split, a mostly younger, more nationalist, and

more formally adventurous group took over, changing the workshop center's name from Frederick Douglass House to the House of Respect. Like the Black House in San Francisco and BARTS in New York, the House of Respect served as school, social center, and performance space; and like these other groups, it would last only briefly, caving in to internal and external pressures. Before its demise, however, the group published another seminal Black Arts work. *Watts Writers and Poets* (1968), edited by Quincy Troupe, was even more strictly a Black Arts anthology than, say, *From the Ashes* or even *For Malcolm*, because it represented only the work of radical black artists.

Los Angeles and the Bay Area were not the only West Coast metropolitan regions to see significant Black Arts activities. Despite having a comparatively smaller black community than many Californian cities, in Seattle the Black Arts scene developed along much the same lines as elsewhere. Inspired by exciting new productions of drama by black writers, particularly Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and given new opportunities to participate in local bohemian, community, and "mainstream" theaters, a cadre of black actors, directors, and playwrights quickly grew. As elsewhere, frustrated by the still limited opportunities for black theater workers, and inspired by the new-wave militant black artists and activists elsewhere, local black cultural activists, including Douglass Barnett and Roberta Byrd Barr, founded a series of new black institutions, including the New Group Theater, Black Arts/West, and the Ensemble Theater to anchor the Seattle movement. Eventually, they forged links with other African American artists and institutions, especially on the West Coast. While the movement in Seattle never achieved that national prominence of the Bay Area and Los Angeles, it had a tremendous impact on the city that remains visible today in the various black cultural institutions, such as the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center.

In the South, the Black Arts and Black Power movements were marked by the long history of organized struggle against Jim Crow segregation, the concentration of historically black colleges and universities offering employment and institutional support to African American artists and intellectuals, and the sheer concentration of black people in the region. That the South had been the epicenter of chattel slavery and the geographical center for the majority of African Americans until the early twentieth century before the advent of the "Great Migration" gave the region a special symbolic resonance; blacks in the South in every sense formed a "black nation." By the 1960s half of black people in the United States still lived in the South, a demographic fact that contributed largely to the choice of electoral work as a key arena of

struggle for the Black Power Movement. Thus, even though the South has been relatively underrepresented in most scholarly work on Black Arts and Black Power, it was in fact a crucial symbolic and practical landscape of those movements.

Despite a rather complicated past, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) remained open to hiring faculty with strong ties to the cultural world of the Left, such as Sterling Brown at Howard University, John Killens at Fisk University, Melvin Tolson at Wiley College (the subject of the film *The Great Debaters*) and Langston University, and Margaret Walker at Jackson State University. Collectively, these figures would do much to encourage young black writers and artists and an incipient Black Arts infrastructure in the South and elsewhere. Many of the pioneers of the Black Arts movement, North, South, and West, including Amiri Baraka, Tom Dent, Ebon Dooley, Sarah Webster Fabio, Nikki Giovanni, Calvin Hernton, Larry Neal, and A. B. Spellman, attended HBCUs during the 1950s and early 1960s.

However, probably the most significant early event in the evolution of the Black Arts Movement in the South was the establishment of the Free Southern Theatre (FST) at Tougaloo College in Mississippi in 1964. The three founders of the FST, John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses, had come from outside the region to work on what they saw as the "frontlines" of the Civil Rights Movement. All had a considerable background in the arts: O'Neal and Moses in the theater and Derby primarily in the visual arts. O'Neal and Derby worked together on the SNCC Literacy Project and Moses was a journalist on a movement newspaper. All three discussed the value of a movement-based theater that could advance the campaigns of SNCC, CORE, and other Civil Rights organizations working in the region.

At first, the racially mixed FST presented a varied and somewhat contradictory repertoire to its audiences in New Orleans and on tour, often to rural black audiences. Some of its work was expressly directed toward the campaigns of SNCC and other Civil Rights groups. It also staged work by contemporary black playwrights, often with connections with the radicalism of the 1930s, like Ossie Davis's *Purlie Victorious* (1961) and Langston Hughes's *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Finally, it presented the work of white, often European, playwrights, such as Beckett and Brecht that rural audiences often found puzzling, if provocative. Despite this disparate repertoire and considerable debate within the FST about the direction of the theater and its productions, it became a dynamic institution, attracting national attention, in part through its fundraising and recruiting trips to New York and through its Board of Sponsors

that included such well-known figures as James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Theodore Bikel, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Langston Hughes.

A watershed moment for the Black Arts Movement in the South was the return of Tom Dent to his native city of New Orleans in 1965, where he quickly became involved with the FST, seeing it as the most exciting black cultural institution in the city. Both during and after his tenure in the FST, Dent worked hard and successfully to connect the young artists of the emerging Black Arts Movement in New Orleans to grassroots artists and intellectuals in New Orleans and throughout the South, encouraging communication and networking. When the touring portion of the FST was suspended in 1967 owing to a loss of funding and the departure of many of the theater's leaders, the workshops became the central focus. The combined workshops soon developed their own performing group and a journal devoted to new black writing in the South, *Nkombo*, edited by Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam. The workshop also published a series of poetry chapbooks by its members, including Dent, Salaam, Nayo [Barbara Malcolm] Watkins, Renaldo Fernandez, and Isaac Black.

Gradually, all across the South, a network of community-based organizations, theaters, workshops, bookstores, and schools took shape through *Nkombo* and BLKARTSOUTH and through the emergence of national Black Power organizations after the first CAP convention in Atlanta in 1970. The southern Black Arts activists continued to feel a certain sense of neglect by national Black Arts institutions. Not only were relatively few Southern black writers published by Broadside Press or Third World Press in the 1960s and 1970s, but also most of the major anthologies, with the exception of Abraham Chapman's *New Black Voices* (1972), ignored the community-based writers in the South. Still, reports of the activities of this Southern network began to find their way into national journals, such as *Black World*, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Black Theatre* – though generally written by the Southern activists themselves, especially Salaam and Dent, rather than staff members of the journals.

Though the Civil Rights Movement and the spirit it engendered as well as the expansion of public education in the 1960s opened up new educational and employment opportunities for African Americans, an extremely large portion of black college students still attended historically black colleges and universities, and a great many black intellectuals and artists working in academia were affiliated with those institutions. Faculty members at the colleges were supportive of the new black writing and art, such as Margaret Walker at Jackson State, John O. Killens at Fisk, and Sterling Brown at Howard. These elder writers also mentored many of the leaders of Black Arts and Black Power, and were able to organize cultural festivals and events

with a national profile where established and emerging authors and artists often met each other for the first time, forming relationships that did much to promote the growth of the national movement.

Probably the most important of these events was the series of three Black writers' conferences organized by Killens at Fisk in 1966, 1967, and 1968. If these conferences are viewed as a progression, one can see the emergence of the Black Arts Movement as the principal force in African American writing. The first conference was dominated by older writers, who came of age in the 1930s and 1940s, with the foremost of the Black Arts writers, notably Amiri Baraka, absent. However, the new black writing haunted the meeting with speaker after speaker referencing the emerging movement either positively or negatively. The famous debate between Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson about the old question of whether one is a "Negro poet" (Tolson) or a poet "who happens to be a Negro" (Hayden) was in some respects a displacement of the debate about Black Arts and the new nationalist art.²⁶ The meeting between Margaret Burroughs, Margaret Walker, and Dudley Randall and their discussion of the growing body of tribute poems to Malcolm X at the 1966 conference also resulted in the first planned Broadside Press book and seminal Black Arts anthology *For Malcolm*. At the 1967 conference, Black Arts stalwarts, including Baraka and playwright Ron Milner, were the central figures – though, again, quite a few older writers participated. It was at the 1967 conference that Gwendolyn Brooks made her "conversion" to Black Arts and Black Power – though it was a conversion with a considerable foreground. By the 1968 conference, Black Arts and Black Power were in complete ascendance.

By the early 1970s, the constituency for Black Arts and Black Power had so increased among the faculty and student body of the HBCUs as well as in the African American community generally that the younger artists and activists were increasingly hired by these schools to teach and actually remake whole departments. Some of the artists hired included poets Haki Madhubuti and Ahmos Zu-Bolton (1935–2005), OBAC painters Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell, and critic Stephen Henderson who joined John O. Killens at Howard, poet Nikki Giovanni at LeMoyne-Owen College, poets Calvin Hernton and Jay Wright at Talladega, poet Keorapetse Kgotsile at North Carolina A & T, writer, critic, scholar, and cultural activist Jerry Ward and poets Jay Wright and Audre Lorde at Tougaloo, poet and critic A. B. Spellman and Henderson (before his departure to Howard) at Morehouse, fiction writer and editor Toni Cade Bambara at Spelman, poet and literary historian Eugene Redmond at Southern University, and poet Donald Lee Graham at Fisk, taking over John Killens's Writers' Workshop. These appointments resulted in an even greater

number of festivals, conferences, and initiatives, especially at Howard and the schools of Atlanta's University Center. One result of this confluence of militant black artists and scholars in the educational and Civil Rights infrastructure of Atlanta was the creation of the Institute of the Black World (IBW), arguably the first black think tank and a vital engine of the Black Studies movement. Among the early products of IBW was Stephen Henderson's 1973 anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, which provided a critical apparatus, including such notions as the "saturation" of blackness and "mascons," or massively concentrated images or tropes of black experience, that still influences the criticism of African American literature today.

Ironically, what was the most successful grassroots regional Black Arts organization, the Southern Black Cultural Alliance (SBCA) came into being as a result of the decline of BLKARTSOUTH and *Nkombo* in New Orleans. When a number of its leading members became involved in a variety of activities, including political organizing and education, that precluded a primary focus on the arts – though virtually all of these people remained friendly and connected, avoiding many of the debates that divided the movement elsewhere – the coalition idea was born. Its chief architect was Tom Dent, who remained focused on the arts, but refused to accept the unraveling of BLKARTSOUTH. He sought a sort of renewal or refocusing of attention on black art in the South, believing that the SBCA could help formalize existing relationships among the many different black theaters and cultural groups within the South, especially after they met at a successful regional conference at West Point, Mississippi in 1972. In addition, *Callaloo* literary journal was founded in 1976 by Charles H. Rowell, along with Tom Dent and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. The journal was initially established to fill a regional publishing void after the demise of *Black World* magazine and to serve as a forum for Southern black writers. Although *Callaloo* is now a journal of "the African Diaspora," its early focus on the South and its writers gave a sense of continuity to the efforts of black artists in the region. In addition, given its initial relationship to particular black writers and cultural enterprises, *Callaloo* is one of the more prominent, continuing outgrowths of the Black Arts era, and a testament to the importance of its Southern roots.

Notes

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2. Bobb Hamilton, "Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At," in Jones and Neal, *Black Fire*, p. 447.
3. Larry Neal, "The Cultural Front," *Liberator* (June 1965): 27.
4. Dudley Randall and Margaret Burroughs (eds.), *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1969), p. xx.
5. Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in Addison Gayle, Jr. (ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 3–12; p. 8.
6. Larry Neal, untitled, *Negro Digest* (January 1968): 35.
7. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12.4 (Summer 1968): 28–39; 29.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), pp. xi, 3.
10. Stanley Crouch, "Toward a Purer Black Poetry Esthetic," *Journal of Black Poetry* 1.10 (Fall 1968): 28.
11. Askia Touré (Rolland Snellings), "Black Magic! (A Statement on the Tasks of the New Poetry)," *Journal of Black Poetry* 1.10 (Fall 1968): 63–64.
12. Ron Karenga (Maulana Karenga), "Black Cultural Nationalism," in Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*; pp. 31–37; p. 33.
13. Dudley Randall, "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties," in Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 224–234; p. 234.
14. Darwin Turner, "African American Literature Critics: An Introduction," in Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 59–80; p. 72.
15. Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), p. 97.
16. Calvin Hernton, "Jitterbugging in the Streets," in Jones and Neal, *Black Fire*, pp. 205–209, p. 206.
17. Samuel Allen, "Nat Turner," in Woodie King (ed.), *The Forerunners: Black Poets in America* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1975), p. 7.
18. Carolyn Rodgers, *Songs of a Black Bird* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1969), p. 10.
19. Quincy Troupe, "Ode to John Coltrane," in Woodie King (ed.), *Black Spirits: A Festival of Black Poets in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 230.
20. Lance Jeffers, "On Listening to the Spirituals," in Arnold Adoff (ed.), *Poetry of Black America: An Anthology of the 20th Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 173.
21. Sonia Sanchez, "liberation/poem," in Abraham Chapman (ed.), *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (New York: Mentor, 1972), p. 337.
22. Geneva Smitherman, "The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and the New Black Poetry," *Twentieth Century Literature* 19.4 (October 1973): 259–274.
23. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 272–290, p. 285.

24. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
25. Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 138.
26. Robert M. Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson, 1896–1966: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), pp. 297–298.

History as fact and fiction

TRUDIER HARRIS

Throughout its tenure on United States soil, African American literature has reflected a combination of History written with a capital “H” and history written in the lower case of everyday folk, that is, the masses of unlettered black folks for whom orality was the primary mode of cultural conveyance. Given the fact that many enslaved Africans were not allowed to learn to read and write, indeed that many states had laws forbidding such learning, it is not surprising that vibrant oral traditions developed among those who suffered through American bondage. Moreover, as Chapter 1 in this volume suggests, indigenous Africans derived from equally rich oral cultures on which they were forced to rely and upon which they could build. The space of oral narrative and folk arts and crafts became as much a part of African American history as academy-derived accounts of enslavement. From this perspective, African American folk traditions, both oral and those deriving from their interactions with the physical culture – such as quilting and basket-making – provide as much of the truth, that is, the history, of African American lives as any researched study. We can therefore speak of the factual history of oral tradition as persuasively as we speak of the factual History of researched/recorded/written traditions. As a people given to orality because of their circumstances in America, African Americans are thus heirs to dual histories, so to speak – that for the ear and that for the eye. When such orality influences written texts, it becomes eye for the ear while more fact-based Historical materials remain eye for the eye.

Folk narrative has a basic imperative: there must be an ear for the voice. It is therefore not surprising that written narratives influenced by the oral tradition frequently employ textual audiences that replicate the function of historical audiences. Or texts may posit themselves as narratives for which the reading audience is equated to listeners. In either scenario, one of the ways in which history influences African American literary construction is borrowing from the dynamic of oral exchange that defines historical African American communities.

Whether that dynamic involves Uncle Julius in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) in his attempts to convince John and Annie of his particular side of a story, or Janie's telling her life experiences to Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), sympathetic audience response is the desired goal. In both instances, the narrative voice has cultural work to achieve, whether that cultural work is rewriting the history of slavery or claiming the value of a life lived fully according to one's own desires. Stated or implicit, the interactive dynamics of audience and narrator inform many African American literary texts.

An examination of texts after the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) – a text saturated with the teller/listener dynamic – reveals that many of them draw upon patterns in African American culture and locate their subject matter in historical practices and events that have shaped African American communities. Many of these texts focus, among other topics, on religious practices and their limitations, historical and folkloristic figures within African American communities, events surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, significant racist occurrences (such as the Atlanta Child Murders), and the multiple facets of slavery.

The vernacular preaching traditions that engaged Zora Neale Hurston's imagination in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) as well as in *Mules and Men* (1935) obviously grew out of historical African American fundamentalist religious communities with their preachers/leaders and their audiences/listeners/responders. These communities have as much of a place in oral or folkloristic traditions as they have in Historical traditions. Many writers follow in Hurston's path in showcasing a fictional – and a realistic – attraction to such communities. James Baldwin and Randall Kenan are two such writers. Whether it is focusing on a quartet that sings gospel songs (*Just Above My Head*, 1979), or recounting in his essays his own flirtation with the ministry (*The Fire Next Time*, 1963), or charting the plights of female ministers (*The Amen Corner*, 1964; *Just Above My Head*, 1979), or documenting the path by which a young male sinner finds his way to God (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 1953), Baldwin allows traditional religion to dominate his own life as well as the lives of his characters. To a lesser extent, the pattern is also clear with Randall Kenan. Having been raised, as Baldwin was, by fundamentalist Christians, Kenan locates the site of identity and salvation within the strictures of the black church that professes faith in a living God and that requires strict obedience from its congregants in *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989). For Baldwin and Kenan, the church as historically imposed upon African American communities falls far short of practicing the love to which a New Testament Jesus adheres.

Baldwin discusses the church in many of his essays, but his best-known fictional creation of this factual history is his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Young John Grimes believes that his soul is in danger of damnation because he discovers sex at the age of fourteen and has not yet professed his salvation in God, which is the primary reason his stepfather, Gabriel Grimes, and the "Saints" he worships among believe man was created. Against the backdrop of his own sinful past and his current sinning present, to which John is only dimly privy, Gabriel Grimes makes life miserable for John, his mother, and his siblings even as he professes a love of God. For the young John Grimes, therefore, religious community pressure, always presumably in the name of love, is the dominating force in his life. It is the kind of pressure documented Historically in discussions of the mourners' bench and how it functioned in historical black churches. Sinners were invited/required during periodic revival sessions to confess their sins and join the communities of believers of which they were a part. Governing the practice was the general belief that Jesus was responsible for his own sins until he arrived at the age of twelve and ran the moneychangers from the Temple. Thus, parents are responsible for children's sins until they arrive at that auspicious age; then, the children should go to the mourners' bench, admit and repent their sins, pray nightly for forgiveness of those sins, recognize when God has responded to their prayers, and join the church. The pressure such young people feel finds its way fictionally into works by Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Baldwin, and others.

The pressure on John Grimes is even more acute because there is a question of unsanctioned sexuality developing in his life, as it will be more acutely for Horace Cross, the protagonist of Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. Guilty of the "sin" of masturbation and possibly attracted to Elisha, the young man with whom he wrestles at church on the night of his conversion, John views himself as intensely sinful. After a night of prayers for him, during which he undergoes a dark night of the soul and arises professing his salvation, it is uncertain if he is truly saved or if pressure from the community of which he is a part has allowed him no alternative but to declare salvation. John's inability to distinguish between his own desires and those of his biological and church families reiterates the pressure of religious communities on young people who are watched over with eagle eyes in those communities. Expectations for salvation are so great that they almost outweigh the possibility of salvation.

The Saints, with their aggressive verbal admonitions, are the audience constantly judging John. Most of them women, and most of them stereotypically overzealous, they chastise young men for not being saved, for not

praying long and hard enough, and for not shouting in church. One church sister even complains that John's mother, Elizabeth, has not found the time to come out to church in the early part of the evening of John's salvation. In love with God, or perhaps – more precisely – in love with their own notions of what God and church represent, these community members are generally intolerant of anyone not of their number, of anyone who dares to see Christianity through lenses of which they have not approved. In spite of the ugliness of their so-called actions of faith, John is not impervious to them. It is the only brand of religious activity that he is privileged to witness, and it is the only brand available for him to accept or reject, though rejection is an unlikely and probably unavailable option.

While Baldwin hints that Christianity fails with John Grimes and other characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Randall Kenan is more explicit in documenting its failure in *A Visitation of Spirits*. The religious community of the fictional Tims Creek is so intent upon saving its reputation and its image of itself that any true Christian endeavor gets pushed aside. Horace Cross is in the unfortunate position of being in the fifth generation of a middle-class black family in Tims Creek, North Carolina, whose male members have served in prominent positions in the local church, such as head of the Deacon Board, since shortly after the Civil War. A precocious sixteen-year-old senior in high school in the early 1980s whose love of books is antithetical to his church's belief that one need know only one book – the Bible – Horace is separated from his family and his religious community by age (most of his relatives are elderly), belief (he questions Christianity on several occasions), and sexuality (he has discovered and relishes same-sex desire). In a confrontation with spiritual destiny comparable to the one that John Grimes has, Horace realizes that the only way to escape the "abomination" of homosexuality, of which his family and community vehemently disapprove (without ever naming his activities directly), is to perform ancient magic (gleaned from his prodigious reading) and turn himself into a redtailed hawk so that he can spend his remaining days near but not in Tims Creek.

That a young man could be driven to such extremes is a reflection not only of history manifesting itself in literature in terms of traditional religion, but of history manifesting itself in terms of small-town Southern black communities and their attitudes toward homosexuality. Often reputed to be homophobic, such communities frequently insisted that persons who experienced same-sex desire operate in a mode of "don't ask, don't tell," even though those persons might have been visible in prominent roles in churches, including serving as deacons and singing in choirs. Kenan captures and questions the silence

surrounding same-sex preferences even as he hints at ways of altering that history. He is therefore one of the writers who refuses the longstanding self-imposed censorship upon creativity when it comes to matters black communities would prefer to keep hidden, such as incest, domestic violence, and homosexuality. The very fact that Kenan writes openly about homosexuality simultaneously highlights and raises questions about a history of the absence of conversations about same-sex desire in African American communities, especially if they are small-town Southern communities. Recently, more of those conversations have taken place, as scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson conduct primary research in such communities. Johnson's *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, about how gay African American males in the South developed strategies for dealing with restrictions on their preferences throughout the twentieth century, appeared in 2008.

By allowing Horace to undergo the painful experiences implicit in his family's rejection of him, Kenan calls attention to the limitations of black churches, where tolerance should occur, as well as to the absence of challenges by their members for those churches to change. In an extended and vivid dark night of the soul, during which his conjured ghouls and demons prance with him through the town of Tims Creek, Horace revisits crucial sites of his life. One of these is First Baptist Church, where he was baptized and where his family has been influential for so long. He listens to his minister deliver a sermon on the sin of homosexuality and condemns himself through a chorus of voices that seems to represent the congregation.

Wicked. Wicked.
 Abomination.
 Man lover!
 Child molester.
 Sissy!
 Greyboy!...
 Unclean bastard!
 Be ashamed of yourself!...
 Homo-suck-shual!
 Ashamed. Be ashamed.
 Faggot!¹

In Horace's imagination, the community can never forgive/accept him. Unlike Ellison's and Hurston's textual listening communities, Kenan's is one dominated by silence. Nowhere during the course of the narrative does Ezekiel, Horace's grandfather, or his great-aunt Jonnie Mae and her doting three daughters acknowledge Horace's true plight. They blast him and banish

him from the dinner table on the Thanksgiving when he pierces one of his ears, but never do they think or even silently acknowledge: "Horace is homosexual." Even a year after Horace commits suicide, there is still a veil of silence around the reasons for his death. Unlike understanding communities, where secular activities could win approval in spite of being problematic, in this community's realm of the soul it is preferable that a young man die than for the community to tolerate his alternative sexuality. Nonetheless, there is an interesting intersection with previous texts in that Kenan depicts this examination of unexpected sexuality in a way where possible action and/or transformation resides only with the extratextual audience. Horace dies, but perhaps readers/listeners will be moved to make sure that no Horace in their world dies for similar reasons. The potential transformation is comparable to that Richard Wright may have hoped for in the readers of *Native Son* (1940). Certainly Bigger is on his way to the electric chair, but readers are alive, active, and capable of preventing future Biggers from ending up with the same fate.

Horace's cousin Jimmy, an ordained minister who became so because Jonnie Mae, his grandmother, deemed that to be the best future for him, is the only person to whom Horace goes for guidance about his sexual dilemma. Jimmy turns out to be a pathetic counselor. Having experienced homosexual activity early in his own life and having sworn it off in favor of marriage and upstanding positions in the community as minister and principal of the local elementary school, Jimmy suggests to Horace that he can "get over" his homosexuality simply by praying: "Pray. Ask God to give you strength and in no time..." (ellipsis in original).² This stock and superficial answer highlights the fact that Jimmy has conformed to the pressures of his familial and religious communities so thoroughly that just the idea of discussing something of which they do not approve makes him too nervous to be of any use to Horace. For Jimmy, and ultimately for Jonnie Mae, her previously sympathetic daughters, and Ezekiel, family reputation means more than exceptional love, so they condemn Horace in their minds in order to remain how they believe they are in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of Tims Creek and the members of First Baptist Church.

In other examinations of religious communities, Kenan indicts in one instance and shows possibility for transformation in another. These examinations occur in his short stories "Clarence and the Dead" and "The Foundations of the Earth," both of which appear in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992). In the first story, Kenan also makes clear the limitations of professing Christians and the so-called religious communities of which they are a part. Under the guise of fantastic events, such as a talking hog and a boy who speaks with the

dead, Kenan shows that small-town religious communities will condemn difference, even when that condemnation occurs under the guise of laughter. When the grieving Ellsworth Batts believes that the young Clarence, through whom his dead wife speaks to him, really contains her spirit, he tries to kidnap the boy so that they can be together. A series of slapstick events occurs, none of which to a careful reader will cover up the fact that the town is willing to see Ellsworth die (he does so by jumping from a bridge) rather than deal with the implication of homosexuality that they believe informs his attempted kidnapping of Clarence. What Kenan achieves in the narrative is comparable to what Charles Chesnutt does under the guise of conjuration in his stories in *The Conjure Woman* (1899). The fantastic events of changing humans to animals or an old man acquiring unusual strength through the eating of grapes do not disguise overly much the horrible ways in which blacks were treated during slavery that led them to seek such extreme remedies.

In "The Foundations of the Earth," a grandmother in Tims Creek learns after his death in a car accident not only that her grandson was gay but that he had been living for many years with his white lover in Boston. Initially shocked into sleep (her family remedy for dealing with difficult situations), she emerges determined to learn more about the young man to whom her grandson was attracted. Realizing that she has been locked into a traditional and intolerant brand of Christianity, she resolves to ask "questions, questions, questions" in an effort to move into a different future. She is brazen enough initially to challenge God about taking her grandson as well as about allowing him to be homosexual, but she is finally wise enough to know that she has had a hand in shaping the distance he had felt from her in not confiding in her. She invites Gabriel, her grandson's lover, down from Boston and genuinely tries to understand their alternative lifestyle. Though there is no imperative to immediate resolution and acceptance, at least Mattie McGowan Williams has started on a path that separates her from the Jimmys, Ezekiels, and Jonnie Maes of Tims Creek.

The same argument might be made of Celie in *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning third novel. Celie grows from being totally dependent on a traditional notion of God to redefining what that concept means in her life; what she achieves is not unlike the searching for and reconceptualization of God that the women characters undergo in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1976). Through acutely negative encounters with men in her life, Celie rejects the notion of godhood as masculine. Having endured rape and impregnations by her stepfather, constant beatings by her husband, violence from her

stepchildren, and total disrespect from her father-in-law, Celie initially cannot imagine God beyond the “fat white man at the bank”³ that gets locked into her head. God is not only alien in gender but alien in race. Even with those separations, however, Celie is still a good “church sister” in the sense Historically that many black women found useful roles to play in the church, such as keeping the pulpit supplied for the minister’s weekly sermons, cleaning, and cooking for occasional gatherings such as fifth Sundays and funerals. For Celie, such practices are obviously “form and fashion and outside show for the world,” because she has no inherent, sustaining belief.

Having directed her letters to God at her violating stepfather’s directive, and having no living mirrors to whom she can turn for alternative guidance, Celie must fumble her way to alternative notions of godhead before Shug Avery arrives to spur her into a more assertive transformation from Christianity. Once Celie learns to enjoy life, especially parts of life that are not sanctioned by her church – such as lesbian sex and smoking marijuana – she can begin to visualize an otherworldliness that does not rely solely on biblical sources. Shug influences Celie by offering this conception of God:

Here’s the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometime it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.⁴

This movement again shows the connection to the women in Shange’s *for colored girls*, women who finally assert that they find God within themselves and they love her, love her “fiercely.”

Shug also asserts that God becomes an “It” that gets “pissed off” if one walks by the color purple in a field without noticing or appreciating it. Under Shug’s tutelage, and with the confidence that Shug’s love inspires in her, Celie can redirect her letters from God, then Nettie, as the exclusive receivers to a multiplicity of receivers: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”⁵

The progression that Celie undergoes might be viewed as a step along the path of Walker’s larger project of rethinking Christianity and spirituality in her works. In an earlier manifestation, she allows Grange in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) to reject his mourners’ bench experience after a fateful revival meeting. Grange attends the service at the insistence of his Uncle Buster, who “shoves” him onto the mourners’ bench; then Uncle Buster proceeds to fall asleep during the service. Grange observes a fly buzzing around Uncle Buster’s

mouth and avows that he will rise from the mourners' bench and join the church if the fly goes inside Uncle Buster's mouth and Uncle Buster swallows it. That is exactly what happens, which allows Grange to exclaim that "he was a member of the church but did not believe in God. For how could any God with self-respect, he wanted to know, bargain with a boy of seven or eight, who proposed such a nasty deal and meal."⁶ Grange resorts to a more humanistic philosophy and mocks traditional churches even as he occasionally attends one.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is also noteworthy because it offers the first examples of Walker's pathological men – Grange and his son Brownfield – that people her fictions. Some are transformed spiritually, as Grange is, while others, such as Brownfield, are not. The most memorable of these villains are Celie's tormentors in *The Color Purple*, the book and film that attracted Walker's largest audience and most vitriolic discussions. The contrast that Walker sets up in her novels is between the graphic presentation of pain and suffering and the search to find something salvageable. For Walker the forms of oppression that women suffer are not individual, but historically and socially based. That history and its accompanying social behavior must and can be transformed. As deeply destructive to the soul as the psychological and physiological brutality is, so too is the possibility of a radical rupture; recovery from trauma, hope and affirmation are essential conclusions. As women heal or become radicalized, for example Celie in *The Color Purple*, Meridian Hill, Fanny and Carlotta in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), and Kate in *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart* (2004), the men – Grange Copeland, Truman Held in *Meridian* (1976), Harpo and Albert in *The Color Purple*, Arveyda and Suwelo in *The Temple of My Familiar* – are reformed. The lessons for both men and women are that self-love must precede relational or familial love, but that this must also extend outward into the universe of humankind as much as to the physical environment. Thus while Walker's early books focused on the need for personal and social transformation, her later works evidence a greater need for her characters to experience spiritual and philosophical renewal and redemption.

Therefore, the seeds of doubt that Grange represents and that Celie cultivates eventually lead to Walker breaking completely with traditional notions of Christianity. That movement is apparent in her works such as *The Temple of My Familiar*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), and especially *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart*. In the last novel, Kate is a seeker who turns to alternative meditation, controlled drug use, and foreign territory in order to realize her full potential as a human being. With the incorporation of non-Christian techniques into ways of reaching the divine, these characters explore

a range of alternative spiritualities, ones that do not have their origins in Historical African American churches, historic folk churches, or any other African American source.

Religious communities that live as much in History as in history showcase one way in which institutions and practices in African American communities can be both factual (Historical) and fictional (historical through oral tradition). Ways of telling stories, as in the cases of Ellison and Hurston, are matched with the substantive nature of the storytelling, as extended with Baldwin and Kenan. Also within those narratives are traditions that can stand alone or be incorporated as individual pieces into narratives, such as heroic figures (comparable to John Henry), classic blues men and women who might echo the likes of Robert Johnson, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, badmen who might reference Staggolee, and conjurers of extraordinary powers who might allude to Marie Leveau or Dr. Buzzard (indeed, Dr. Buzzard is a character in one of the novels). Inclusions of such figures in the fiction echo the needs of historical African American communities for various kinds of heroes – ones who could confront whites more directly than the trickster model of Br'er Rabbit or ones who had power over and above the force of the whites around them. Others could be heroic simply for the freedom of movement they exhibited, the refusal to be tied down to common rules and laws. Remember Richard Wright's accounting of the number of black males he had met upon whom he based the character of Bigger Thomas. Whether those Biggers were villainous (usually) or just defiant (occasionally), they reflected a need within individuals as well as within communities to define freedom outside of whatever a restricting society thought might have been appropriate for black people.

In the case of William Melvin Kelley in *A Different Drummer* (1962), the heroic figure is a giant African who inspires five generations of African Americans. For Ernest J. Gaines in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), the heroic figure is a centenarian who survives slavery and eventually becomes a Civil Rights pioneer in the 1960s. For Albert Murray in *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), the hero is a legendary bluesman. For Raymond Andrews (1934–91) in *Appalachee Red* (1978) and other novels, he is a gun-toting stranger who can match Staggolee in the violence he wields. For Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977), he is a flying African, while for Toni Cade Bambara (1939–95) in *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day* (1988), the heroines are healers/conjure women/power brokers. All of these figures represent various hopes, dreams, and coping strategies that have informed African American communities throughout their histories. They serve similar purposes for the fictional worlds of which they are a part.

Kelley's heroic creation responds to a basic question: How did African Americans operate and survive under American apartheid? How did they live in a segregated world where there were strictures on their bodies and slavery-induced shackles on their minds? Where, in a world that deemed them powerless, did they find even a semblance of agency? The world of the late 1950s in which Kelley began the writing of *A Different Drummer* was one in which Civil Rights activities were beginning but were not widespread. Emmett Till had been killed a few years earlier. Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat to a white man and had sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Yet black people as a whole were still locked into separate worlds from whites, still forced to say "Yes, sir" and "Yes, ma'am" to any white person they encountered. They were made to know each and every day that they were deemed inferior to the people who had the power to control their fates. Martin Luther King, Jr. was slowly becoming one of their heroes, but heroic actions generally were small and few and far between. Emmett Till's grandfather, who bravely pointed out Till's murderer in a Mississippi courtroom, or Rosa Parks herself, or an anonymous individual who refused to bend to the will of a white person may all have been admirable, but collective transformation was slow in coming. The early days of the Civil Rights Movement were perhaps defined more by bleakness than by general optimism, though some optimism was apparent. Stepping into the void to conceptualize what collective action – prompted by a single individual – might look like, Kelley cast his protagonist in *A Different Drummer* as a Southern everyman who can inspire the masses.

As a strategy to broaden the collective appeal, Kelley creates a mythical state in the South instead of locating the action in an already existing state. Also, in contrast to what might be expected, he casts a diminutive black man, Tucker Caliban, as his hero. Tucker is in the fifth generation of his family to work for the Willson family. A chauffeur who is certainly better off than the preceding members of his family who started out enslaved to the Willsons, Tucker nevertheless feels that it is time he broke the Caliban tie to the Willsons. In his decisive act of destroying the livestock and property he has purchased from David Willson, he emulates in the 1950s the actions of "the African," his giant ancestor who refused to be enslaved. In the larger than life way in which contemporary narrators describe the African, he clearly represents the undeniable will to be free, the kind that Robert Hayden captures so vividly in his poem "Runagate Runagate" – "Mean mean mean to be free."⁷ Mythology and history come together in portraying the African as legendary. When he arrives in New Marsails, the port at which Dewitt Willson, David's grandfather, observes him, it takes thirty men to hold him in place. His bellow

is reputed to bulge out the sides of the boat, he snatches a chain and cracks a hole in one side of the boat, and when he emerges from below decks, he stands two heads taller than the other men. Dewitt is so enamored that he avows to purchase the African and break him. The description of the sale and what happens immediately following caps the legendary characterization.

Nobody, not even folks what claims to-a seen it, is really certain about what happened next. It must-a been them crewmen, who was still holding all them chains, relaxed when they saw all that money, because the African spun around once and nobody was holding nothing except maybe a fist full of blood and skin where them chains had rushed through like a buzz saw. And now the African was holding ALL them chains, had gathered them up like a woman grabs up her skirts climbing into an auto, and right off he started for the auctioneer like he understood what that man was saying and doing, which could not-a been since he was African and likely spoke that gibberish them Africans use. But leastways, he DID go after the auctioneer and some folks swears, though not all, that, using his chains, he sliced his head off – derby and all – and that the head sailed like a cannon ball through the air a quarter mile, bounced another quarter mile and still had up enough steam to cripple a horse some fellow was riding into New Marsails. Fellow came into town babbling about having to shoot his horse after its leg got splintered by a flying head wearing a green derby.⁸

Comparable to John Henry, who initially beats down presumably unconquerable forces, so too does the African. He harasses Dewitt Willson and almost makes him delusional. Dewitt tracks him for weeks, while he easily eludes capture; indeed, the African runs through Dewitt's plantation one day in an almost taunting gesture. It is only when he finally catches up to him and realizes that the African will never submit to slavery that Dewitt shoots him to death. He takes the baby the African has been carrying, names him Caliban, and raises him as the first domesticated member of the family from which Tucker is descended.

Mr. Harper, the local white raconteur in the small town in which Kelley sets his narrative, tells the tale of the African to a group of white men assembled on a store porch. He offers it as a historical explanation for the mild-mannered Tucker Caliban all of a sudden executing such militant actions that he inspires blacks throughout this mythical state to renounce their contemporary quasi-enslavement and seek better opportunities elsewhere. Tucker's bloodlines are responsible for his current actions, Mr. Harper maintains.

But the way I see it, it's pure genetics: something special in the blood. And if anybody in this world got something special in his blood, his name is Tucker

Caliban... I can see whatever was in his blood just a-laying there sleeping, waiting, and then one day waking up, making Tucker do what he did. Can't be no other reason. We never had no trouble with him, nor him with us. But all at once his blood started to itch in his veins, and he started this here ... this here revolution ... It's got to be the African's blood! That's simple!"⁹

Although blacks contemporary with Tucker and Mr. Harper may not know of the African, they know Tucker, and his decision to kill his livestock, salt his land, and burn down his house offers to them a model of resistance. It is that hope for the possibility of resistance, the hope that things could get better, that provides the kernel of belief in such figures as the African and Tucker Caliban.

Ernest J. Gaines's Miss Jane Pittman may well be a member of the audience listening to the tales of the African and Tucker Caliban, for she holds out hope that the conditions under which she lived during and after slavery will one day give way to more African American self-determination. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the title character survives slavery and a series of violent and misfortunate occurrences to assist in the ushering in of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. In the title role of the movie made from the novel, Cicely Tyson, in dramatic make-up, takes a drink from a water fountain marked "white" to illustrate the spirit of defiance in the group of blacks Miss Jane has led from the plantation on which she resides. Too elderly for any law officer to hit who would remotely consider himself human, Miss Jane is able to execute the symbolic breaking down of the walls of segregation and to instate the period of integration in a Louisiana environment that has been particularly repressive in its treatment of its black citizens. That oppression is keenly regressive because blacks are at the bottom of a racial hierarchy that includes whites, Cajuns, and Creoles, all of whom discriminate routinely against blacks, a reality Miss Jane determines to live with no longer. Her spirit of defiance, captured so vividly in the movie, resonates throughout the novel.

The history that Gaines draws upon includes slavery, the interactions of blacks with the various color-conscious groups that have shaped their destiny as exploitable laborers and servants, and a history of narrative that enables the recounting of all those adventures. Miss Jane tells her story as a collective venture, with persons close to her assisting in the recounting of her life. The dynamics of tellers and listeners is especially important to Gaines, for an interviewer interested in her longevity literally has her on the porch recounting her life. There are therefore multiple levels of audiences and interactions in the novel. The interviewer, a conspicuous outsider, listens to Miss Jane and her co-narrators. Miss Jane's friends, who know and help with her story, are listening to her as well as to each other, and everyone on the porch or in the

house is listening to everyone else. The interviewer is engaged in revisionist history, not unlike many of the historians of the 1970s who revisited slavery and tried to tell it from the points of view of those enslaved. His mere presence gives value to Miss Jane's life in the way that Chesnutt valued the lives of those persons he interviewed and who informed and inspired his fictional creations. Several oral histories thus combine to shape Miss Jane's autobiography. The process of recording it adds even more value.

Miss Jane's existence is as important factually as it is fictionally. To know that black folks thrived after slavery in spite of obstacles arrayed against them warrants applause. To know that they survived in groups that valued community, education, political organization, and racial defiance (in spite of violence brought to bear against them) warrants even more applause. Miss Jane thus becomes heroic for her actions and her longevity as well as for the fact of her existence that created curiosity and appreciation in others. She is a legend in her community as well as a legend to the interviewer who wants to tell her story. The documentation within the narrative, that is, for the textual audience, therefore mirrors documentation outside the narrative for listeners/readers who can view Miss Jane's story as a metaphor for the spirit of survival that defined so many black people after slavery.

The intertwining of history and folk narrative in this instance is a pattern that Gaines adopts in several of his novels, including *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), where the story of what actually happens in the death of Beau Boutan, a racist Cajun farmer on a Louisiana plantation, is no less significant than the stories surrounding that death. The narratives the black men offer as each takes credit for killing Beau chart a history of denial and repression in racist Louisiana. Physical and psychological strictures whites, Cajuns, and Creoles placed on blacks find voice in these fictive narratives of confession, narratives that are at times truer than any recorded History could be. Similarly, the story of the racist practices in the Louisiana legal system are caught as dramatically in a Gaines narrative such as *A Lesson before Dying* (1993) as they are in any recorded History. It is a fact of Southern history that black men were regularly accused of and executed for crimes that they did not commit, as is Jefferson in Gaines's novel. Tales of such injustices shape the oral historical landscape as frequently as they shape the fictive landscape and the Historical landscape.

Miss Jane's heroic strength, in contrast to the African's brute force and superhuman strength, is in her moral superiority to the representatives of injustice that surround her. Other heroic figures provide models for celebration because they are outside the laws of the environments in which they live and use their brawn and their guns to provide the stuff of legends. Ole Luze in

Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* and Andrews's *Appalachee Red* in the novel of the same title are loners who offer vicarious opportunities for those who celebrate them to share in their adventures. Few tellers of the tales of John Henry would actually consider emulating him, but there is nonetheless a pride and a pleasure in hearing of his exploits. So too with figures such as Old Luze. In that space of appreciation for actions that listeners themselves could not execute is the site for the function that such narratives hold. They provide a respite, no matter how brief, from the blues of being beaten down by the larger society. Indeed, the purposes are comparable. The blues enable singers and listeners to cope with the difficulties of their lives, just as sermons and church services enable the downtrodden to find the strength to go back to exploitative jobs on Monday morning. In that brief space of listening, legendary figures in folk tales and narratives can provide some of the same cathartic release that singing or shouting might provide, as James Baldwin makes so vivid in his 1957 story "Sonny's Blues." That is certainly the case with Scooter and his friend Lil Buddy in *Train Whistle Guitar*. Old Luze is their hero, and they chart their adolescence by encounters with him and narratives about his life.

Old Luze represents escape, transcendence from the mundane lives the boys lead in Gasoline Point, Alabama. They cast him romantically as all that they are not, and they portray him as leading a kind of heavenly existence. "Old Luze," they intone, has "the world in a jug and the stopper in [his] hand." He is "a man among men":¹⁰ "If Luze can't ain't nobody can."¹¹ Scooter notes that Luze is "as rough and ready as rawhide and as hard and weather worthy as blue steel, and that he was always either going somewhere or coming back from somewhere and that he had the best walk in the world, barring none (until Stagolee Dupas (*fil*s) came to town)."¹² With his ".32-20 in his underarm holster" and "his guitar slung across his back,"¹³ Luze undertakes the travel that they, in their youthfulness, cannot – although they attempt to do so. It is their effort to imitate Luze literally that leads to his debunking the myth of himself. The boys decide to hop a freight and travel like Luze, but he catches them in the act and takes them back home. The humiliation they endure and the lecture he gives them about the value of education ("Make old Luze proud of you") substitute one kind of legend for another. Scooter learns that heroism can be achieved through learning just as it can be realized in the bluesman hero. One might be relevant for the first half of the twentieth century, but another is relevant for the second half. If the boys are truly to progress and compete, then their weapons will have to be their minds, not guitars, guns, or mastering the art of hopping freight trains.

The escape that characterizes Old Luze is also apparent with Alice Walker's Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*. For men and women in that novel, Shug is the quintessential blueswoman outlaw, the individual who scorns communal norms and lives as she decides. She shows that she does not respect marriage when she continues to have sex with Albert after his first marriage; she is unabashedly shameless in her sexuality. And she will not be confined by any law of expectation. Like Toni Morrison's Sula, she travels when and where she will in a time when black women were mostly homebodies. Singing gives her license to travel and to upset, as she sees fit, whatever hinders her from her own enjoyment.

Just as Ole Luze is heroic to the young boys in Gasoline Point, Alabama, so is Shug heroic to Celie, Albert, and the scores of black folk who come to hear her sing in Harpo's newly constructed juke joint. Walker captures a slice of the lives of Historical blues singers by showcasing Shug, her lifestyle, and her impact upon the communities in which she resides as well as those in which she performs. As is clear with her influence upon Celie, she also has a positive streak that enables her to do good occasionally. Therefore, although she may not hop the rails and ride as Old Luze does, she is just as influential in transforming a life around her.

Just as Murray captures the history of African Americans who rode the rails during the Depression and of the bluesmen with their guitars slung over their shoulders who preferred roaming to the settled life, so too does Raymond Andrews draw upon the history of American apartheid to create his characters. In a world in which black people were confined geographically to the least attractive sections of whatever towns in the United States they resided in, they often took those designated spaces and established businesses that varied from cafés to barbershops and from printing companies to funeral homes. Within the confines of those spaces, they could escape the prying eyes of whites for long stretches of time, and they could feel a certain amount of control that was otherwise unavailable to them. Comparable to all-black towns, these black sections of larger towns were mostly worlds unto themselves. It was only in cases of severe social disturbance that "the Man" would be called into such areas. Andrews's fictional world in *Appalachee Red* is one in which blacks reign most of the time; however, the Man nonetheless has a powerful impact – from raping black women to effecting periodic displays of violence and domination to ensure that the black populace understands its inferior status. Violence within the community alternates between a will to self-governance and a desire to exhibit the same kind of domination that whites exhibit over blacks.

Appalachian Red is a fictional world in which self-sufficiency and separation from whites are apparent, but it is also one in which violence and domination are prominent, one in which guns reign as often as the verbal power of persuasion. The title character is sired by the most powerful white man upon his black maid in this small town in Georgia. That maid, in the face of her husband's rage, sends the "red baby" to Chicago to live with her sister. He returns to Appalachia as an adult, ostensibly to exact revenge on the father he believes has wronged him. The mystery surrounding him, however, makes his true motives unclear, for he has no confidants, and the townspeople perhaps create as much information about him as they actually learn. What they do know is that a large, powerfully built, rather silent but deadly light-skinned black man has entered their territory. He takes over the local café, banishes its previous owner, takes the sheriff's black under-age honey-pot, and then proceeds to engage in very lucrative business opportunities with that same sheriff and other powerful white men in Appalachia. The mystery continues in the absence of a name for this stranger who seems so potent sexually, politically, and financially. The indeterminate appellation enables vicarious identification with Red and, for the more adventurous, the possibility of slotting themselves into his adventures, as tellers of oral tales routinely do through a technique called "the intrusive I," which Roger D. Abrahams discusses in his treatment of African American folklore in *Deep Down in the Jungle*.¹⁴ In relating a tale of Staggolee, for example, instead of the narrator using third person, he may say, "Back in '32 when times were hard/*I* had a sawed off shotgun and a crooked deck of cards," instead of indicating that those items belonged to Staggolee. Like the African and Old Luze, what Red represents to the communities that observe or hear about him is of crucial importance, for he also is a site of resistance, a site of control in a world where black people frequently find little control, freedom, or financial success.

Making Red larger than life, however, shares traits with mythologizing the African and Old Luze, and audience is crucial to that process. The locals observe Red from the porch of the funeral home across the street from the café, and what they cannot witness they embellish from the tidbits they do hear. Entering the café with a "catlike grace" upon his return in 1945, Red renders the local gossips speechless just with the way he carries himself. Initially referenced as "the stranger," "that goddamn stranger," "that red nigger," and "That Big Red Nigger," Red inspires fear and piques the curiosity of more and more of the black population as he takes Sheriff Boots White's girl and sets himself up in the café. When he bests Snake, the local "blade king," by pulling a gun, his reputation escalates even more. The onlookers keep

“constant watch” on the goings on around what becomes known as “Red’s Café,” and they increasingly become enamored of the “don’t give a damn” way in which Red handles himself. They celebrate his challenges to Boots White, admire his establishing of a new eatery for them and cleaning up the riffraff in the local alley, and are totally won over when he purchases “the longest, blackest, and prettiest car any of them had ever before laid eyes to.”¹⁵ For them, as for Murray’s narrator Scooter and his friend Lil Buddy, Red fulfills a need – the need to know that they are not always to be downtrodden, that white oppression can be overcome, and that justified violators of the law sometimes escape with those violations.

Noticeably, with the African and Old Luze as with Red, morality and adherence to law are issues that get elided. The African, a leader in his own country, recognizes no right except his own. Hopping the rails and carrying a gun may be illegal, but Old Luze does both anyway. And Red creates and operates by his own law. The point is that admiration from black audiences and readers is tied less to pure Christian morality than to recognition of qualities in these heroic figures that they value. As John W. Roberts points out in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989), morality is flexible in assessing heroic potential in African American communities: “figures (both real and mythic) and actions dubbed heroic in one context or by one group of people may be viewed as ordinary or even criminal in another context or by other groups, or even by the same ones at different times.”¹⁶ Just as it would have been difficult to condemn a mother who slit her daughter’s throat rather than allow her to grow up in slavery, so it would be difficult, given the conditions of black people in America, to condemn a black man who got the best of a white sheriff or who, through means usually judged to be illegal, acquired the funds or goods to help many other black people, as the legendary Railroad Bill was reputed to have done and as Roberts treats him in *From Trickster to Badman*.¹⁷ The history that informs these literary creations, therefore, allows readers to contextualize character without being strictly judgmental about that context.

The ambiguous nature of heroic creation is relevant in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) in the myth of the Flying Africans as well as in Milkman Dead’s desire to follow in his great-grandfather’s path of achieving flight. There was a tribe of Africans, so the mythology goes, who could fly. Forced into bondage in the New World, they simply had to utter magic words and return to Africa. Emendations on the basic myth include Paule Marshall’s notion of such Africans walking back to Africa in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Angelita Reyes’s historical study in *Mothering Across Cultures* (2002) that

posits suicide as a way for enslaved Africans to “fly” out of slavery.¹⁸ However, the literal reference to the myth of flying informs Morrison’s novel. Spoiled, materialistic, and world-weary, Milkman Dead travels from his family’s home in Michigan to uncover the truth of his father’s and aunt’s pasts in Pennsylvania and Virginia. The latter yields information that turns the quest for gold into a quest for the gold of family history. Milkman discovers that his great-grandfather, Solomon, flew back to Africa. The problem is that, by saving himself, he left his wife and twenty-one sons to the merciless condition of enslavement. Milkman must progress, therefore, from discovering flight to realizing that selfish flight is a denial of responsibility. No matter how glamorous the idea of Solomon’s taking to the air might be, the action nonetheless brought grief to twenty-two people.

“You just can’t fly on off and leave a body,”¹⁹ Milkman’s Aunt Pilate repeats throughout *Song of Solomon*, and it is the refusal to desert others that defines true heroism. Just as Old Luze feels it necessary to deflate Scooter and Lil Buddy’s overly developed sense of who he is, so too must Milkman learn something else than simply escape through flight. Education is that something else for Scooter and Lil Buddy. It is not quite clear what the option is for Milkman at the end of the text. If he should survive his plunge toward Guitar, then perhaps he may indeed assume responsibility for Reba and perhaps even his mother. But that is left to speculation. He takes the leap. His good intent is all that is left to contemplate.

Morrison undertakes her own process of debunking a myth in a way by showing that Solomon has feet of clay. Nonetheless, her focus on the Flying Africans, which she learned about from stories that her parents told, is another intersection of the fictional with the factual. The fact of African American oral narratives combines with the fiction of creation within them to produce a legacy of imaginative reproduction that informs almost all of African American literature.

Morrison joins all of her predecessors in creating heroic figures who are male. The tradition does allow, however, for heroic representation in the feminine. These women inspire the communities in the fictional constructs in which they appear just as assuredly as such women historically were revered in their communities. Morrison captures well the respect that accrues to the conjurer/healer M’Dear in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), just as Chesnutt captures the respect that both black and white communities hold for Aun’ Peggy, his conjure woman. In more contemporary versions of this figure, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor feature them in *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *Mama Day* (1988), respectively. Minnie Ransom is a “fabled healer” in *The Salt Eaters*,

and Sapphira Wade and Mama Day are equally so in *Mama Day*. The women come by their powers through legacies that are not as implicitly represented in narratives of heroic male figures. Consider the legendary Marie Leveau of New Orleans, for example. She acquires her power in part from a singing snake (at least in the Hurston version in *Mules and Men*), but she is also the descendant of a conjurer, and she in turn bestows her powers upon her daughter, who is also named Marie Leveau. Minnie Ransom is anointed by forces that preceded her (including a spirit guide who, while alive, watched Minnie's anointing), and she seems poised to bequeath her skills to Velma Henry, the problematic protagonist, if she can inspire in Velma a healthy desire to live and to serve. Mama Day is the descendant of Sapphira Wade, narratives about whom inform the imaginations of generations of the citizens of Willow Springs, the mythical island on which the current action takes place. And Mama Day herself is similarly the subject of such narratives, for she has powers equal to if not superior to those of Sapphira Wade. In addition, her grand-niece Cocoa will probably become the recipient of Mama Day's powers.

Minnie heals primarily by touching, which she tries to achieve with Velma, who has slit her wrists and stuck her head in an oven, but she can also heal at a distance if the need arises. Of her fabled powers, the narrator comments:

Calcium or lymph or blood uncharged, congealed and blocked the flow, stopped the dance, notes running into each other in a pileup, the body out of tune, the melody jumped the track, discordant and strident. And she would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand at the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their heads bobbed, till it was melodious once more. And often she did not touch flesh on flesh but touched mind on mind from across the room or from cross town or the map linked by telephone cables that could carry the clue spoken – a dream message, an item of diet, a hurt unforgiven and festering, a guilt unreleased – and the charged response reaching ear then inner ear, then shooting to the blockade and freeing up the flow. Or by letter, the biometric reading of worried eyes and hands in writing, the body transported through the mails, body/mind/spirit out of nexus, out of tune, out of line, off beat, off color, in a spin off its axis, affairs aslant, wisdom at a tangent and she'd receive her instructions. And turbulence would end.²⁰

Mama Day's Sapphira Wade is similarly otherworldly:

A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her

medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four.²¹

In turn, Mama Day is known to have the power to make people howl inexplicably at the moon, read people's problems by simply looking at them on television, induce fertility in barren women, and cast spells that destroy houses and burn villains to a crisp.

"Depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" could apply to any of the three women, for how they are perceived is as much a function of audience and community as it is a function of the powers they possess. And they, like the heroic male figures, fulfill various needs within their communities, whether those needs are as dramatic as achieving freedom for an entire family or as simple as planting a garden. The textual audiences surrounding these women highlight the respect they have for them, the awe they have for their powers, and the credibility they give to what they can achieve. It is that credibility, that desire to believe, that links these female characters with their male counterparts. In the historical communities out of which such beliefs developed and grew, raconteurs used the fact of folk accomplishment and the fictive qualities of their imaginations to shape legacies that have existed as long as people of African descent have been on American soil. This parallel history to recorded, written History remains just as factual in documenting African American lives and culture as the fictional worlds into which these histories find their way.

While Bambara and Naylor expend novel-length treatments on conjure women, Alice Walker spends a couple of short stories on such treatment, both of which appear in *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1974). In "Strong Horse Tea," Rannie Toomer is a young black woman in a rural area with a sick child. Desperate for attention from a "white" doctor, whom she implores her postman to dispatch to her farm, Rannie eventually accepts the fact that Aunt Sarah, the conjure woman whom the postman has hailed, is the only possible help she has for her dying son. The conjure woman sends her to get horse urine as a cure, and while Rannie is chasing the mare in a rainstorm her son dies back in her cabin. The story raises questions about Walker's appreciation – or not – for the conjuring tradition that many other black women writers find viable. That ambivalence is also apparent in another Walker story in which a conjure woman appears.

In "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," Hannah seeks out Tante Rosie, a local conjure woman, to repay a white woman who denied her relief food during the Great Depression, which has led to the deaths of all five of

Hannah's children. Interestingly, Walker pulls the cover off the secrets to conjuration by having the narrator, Tante Rosie's assistant, assert that the conjure woman has files on practically everybody in the county. Mrs. Holley, the villain, is indeed punished, but it is left to speculation as to whether or not conjuration is the source of her demise or if she commits suicide. Again, Walker inserts ambiguity where Bambara and Naylor highlight certainty – or at least action without question. The narrator in "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" certainly makes clear the role that conjuration has played in Historical black communities, but she is also the source of possible doubt; she posits that logical actions can yield the same results that operate in the realm of belief in historical black folk communities. Nonetheless, Tante Rosie and Aunt Sarah, as Walker's conjure women, are as integral a part of the tradition of historical representation as are those of Bambara and Naylor.

Traditions of conjuration that define Bambara's and Naylor's narratives also shape the creative imagination of Tina McElroy Ansa. In her novels *Baby of the Family* (1989) and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), small-town Georgia beliefs dominate the narratives. A widespread belief in African American communities is that babies born with caul (birth sacs) over their faces will have second sight, that is, the ability to see ghosts and perhaps other otherworldly creatures. That is the fate of Lena McPherson in *Baby of the Family*. Born to a middle-class family in Mulberry, Georgia (based on Macon), Lena inherits ghost-seeing traits because her mother, whose upward mobility has led her to reject traditional beliefs, does not handle the birth sac properly. When special things start happening to Lena, including visits from ghosts, the child must learn to deal with her gifts, her dead grandmother, her skeptical and teasing brothers, and her doting parents. In *The Hand I Fan With*, an adult Lena, who now fully appreciates her gifts, is able to conjure up a lover who has been dead for quite some time. While *The Hand I Fan With* moves beyond the fantastic to broach the fanciful, it nonetheless joins with *Baby of the Family* in illustrating the significance of tales about otherworldliness to African American communities, as Kelley makes clear in *A Different Drummer* and Morrison in *Song of Solomon*.

Even as Ansa charts extranatural occurrences, she also, like Raymond Andrews, charts a history of black self-help during American apartheid. Lena is born in an all-black hospital, and her father is owner of a café, grill, and liquor store that is the heart of the community of Mulberry. This fictional world provides a rare look at a nuclear, middle-class black family that works and vacations together. Ansa's world is in many ways a celebration of black life and culture, an environment into which young Lena is welcomed and one that

shapes who she becomes as an adult. Well educated and capable of taking care of herself in *The Hand I Fan With*, Lena continues the tradition of entrepreneurship that her father exemplified. While the extranatural features of the novel might take center stage, they do not overshadow the healthy life worlds of the black people who participate in them. That health, Ansa suggests, is well worth celebrating, whether it is in the guise of a child talking to the dead or a grown woman finding love in an unusual place.

Ansa joins Raymond Andrews in writing about the South, specifically about Georgia, and both writers anticipate Tayari Jones's focus on that state. Equally as important, they mark the trend among African American writers to focus on the territory that has been the most problematic for African Americans. Instead of migrating to the North or out of the country, as writers such as Ellison and Baldwin did, Andrews (after a stint away), Ansa (who resides on St. Simon Island, Georgia), and Jones (born in Atlanta) find their creative inspiration in the South. Indeed, when Jones lived in Illinois, she proclaimed that her imagination lived in Atlanta. Echoing Ernest J. Gaines, who migrated to San Francisco at mid-twentieth century but continued to write about Louisiana, these writers sift through the violence and ugliness of Southern history to find the riches that fuel their creative imaginations, whether those riches result in the kind of humor that informs Andrews's work, the supernaturalism that defines Ansa's, or the ugliness of racial violence that informs Jones's work.

The intertwining of factual history and the fictive power of folk imagination occurs impressively in Tayari Jones's first novel, *Leaving Atlanta* (2002). With the Atlanta Child Murders that occurred between 1979 and 1981 as backdrop, Jones blends rumor and fact to portray how pervasive the fear of child snatchings was to the average black pre-teen in Atlanta during this frightening period. Jones was herself a fifth grader during the time of the murders, and she sets her novel in an elementary school in the southwest Atlanta area from which most of the children were snatched. In the absence of factual information about the Child Murders, the folk concocted their own theories, as do the children in the novel. Historically, conspiracy theories abounded, with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the FBI, the CIA, and the KKK being considered prime suspects. In "The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in the Black Community," folklore scholar and rumor specialist Patricia A. Turner captures most of these theories in her study in the aftermath of the murders.²² With information frequently not forthcoming, and with a government in place that appeared to be more concerned about its pristine reputation than about finding child murderers, it is easy to imagine how the folk, forced to watch these proceedings from a distance, satisfied their

own needs for information by using their imaginations. That they did so is no less legitimate than the actual fact of investigation that was going on – or not. And it is certainly no less legitimate than the claim by one FBI agent that black parents were killing their own kids. In the face of rumor, distorted and missing information, a seeming lack of concern on the part of authority figures to solve the cases, and the general fear that seized the community, the parallel history that developed surrounding the Atlanta Child Murders, that is, the fictive history of the oral tradition, makes clear in contemporary times the powerful links among fact, fiction, faction, and folklore.

Jones does not focus on locating the Child Murderer(s). Instead, she locks her narrative into the minds and attempted explanations that fifth graders glean from their parents and others in efforts to understand the mad world surrounding them. Tragedies they experience, such as not being invited to a party, feeling the antipathy of a father, or being frightened because a mother works third shift and leaves the child alone are as significant in their lives as are the child snatchings. What is important in relation to those murders is that rumor and innuendo abound as readily as fact. In an environment in which lack of clarity is constant, which one of those dominates is irrelevant. People use their imaginations to cope with tragedy, to cope with a sense of helplessness from which no hero or heroine can extricate them, and to attempt, as best they can, to effect a bit of control over their environment. That force of their historical situations is as powerful as any recorded truth.

Jones therefore joins her fellow African American writers in drawing upon legacies in imagination and folk history as well as legacies in textbook Histories (though textbook Histories about the Atlanta Child Murders have been slow in coming) to dramatize a keenly dramatic moment in recent Atlanta memory. Her novel reiterates a recurring motif – what is considered factual in one context might simply be deemed imaginative in another, and what is “true” history by one group may be considered distorted or perverted by another.

With her solid base in Atlanta, Jones makes clear that the younger generation of African American writers echoes its elders in looking to the troublesome South for a large part of its imaginative inspiration. That inspiration is most realized in post-1952 fictional creation in what has been labeled the neo-slave narrative, a term first coined perhaps by Bernard Bell. Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) provides the most comprehensive study of the genre to date. Rushdy defines the neo-slave narrative as that body of “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative.”²³ This tradition includes writers already mentioned, such as

Morrison and Naylor, as well as a host of others. For some authors, slavery serves as a texturing layer to their fiction. For others, slavery is *the* impetus for their literary creations. For purposes of this discussion, neo-slave narratives divide into four categories. First, there are the texts by women writers for whom slavery serves as the center of their narratives as they represent their female characters. These include Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1966), Sherley Anne Williams (1944–99) in *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987), and J. California Cooper in *Family* (1991). In each of these texts, the experiences of the characters are contemporary with the chronology of slavery and its immediate aftermath. In the second category, characters in the twentieth century find themselves haunted by and/or experiencing the conditions of slavery. These texts include Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). Slavery receives rather light-hearted coverage in the third category – as the subject of satire in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) as well as in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990). While Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003) properly fits with the first category in its exclusive focus on slavery, it warrants separate treatment as the latest installment of the neo-slave narrative tradition, one in which a black male author paints on a panoramic scale in depicting how white *and* black slaveholders treat those whom they have enslaved. These categories and works, however, do not exhaust the list of contemporary authors who are drawn to treat slavery in their works. Some of the others include Alex Haley (1921–92) in *Roots* (1976) and *Queen* (1993), Barbara Chase-Riboud in *Sally Hemings* (1979), Louise Meriwether in *Fragments of the Ark* (1994), Caryl Phillips in *Crossing the River* (1994), and John Edgar Wideman in *The Cattle Killing* (1996).

Given the lingering impact of slavery upon African American lives, it is no surprise that slavery would be central to African American creativity. Informing the neo-slave narrative, however, is a certain amount of folk tradition, a certain desire to imbue characters who were subjected to various inhumanities during slavery with a credible amount of derring-do, of ability to influence if not ultimately change their situations. What slavery in History denied to black Americans, slavery in literary history grants to them: the power to have a bit of control over their destinies. Kelley's African refused to be subjected, and Morrison's Solomon flew back to Africa. In sometimes quieter and sometimes more aggressive ways, the heroines of Walker's *Jubilee*, Morrison's *Beloved*, Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Cooper's *Family* manage to claim ways to exist on soil and in circumstances not meant to be conducive to their healthy survival.

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* marked the unofficial beginning of the neo-slave narrative sub-tradition in African American literature. Few could have foreseen that this novel, the result of Walker's research over a thirty-year period on her great-grandmother, would usher in a primary focus on slavery in African American literary texts that continues today. Walker's interest in the life of her foremother moved from family history during and after slavery to coincide with a general return to the origins of black resiliency in America, for *Jubilee* charts resiliency perhaps more than anything else. The heroine of the novel, Vyry Brown, who is the devalued daughter of her slavemaster, takes the moral high ground after Emancipation by remaining on the plantation and caring for her white relatives. Upon their deaths and convinced that her lover will not return, Vyry fends for herself as best she can in the rapidly changing post-slavery world.

Movement initially appeals to Vyry and her family as a way of escaping from and dealing with the violence and displacement around them. More important, Vyry identifies skills she has and makes herself essential to the whites, who could turn on her family at any moment. She does this by becoming a midwife. When local whites – who stereotypically believe that black women have a special way with babies – discover how good Vyry is at delivering, Vyry and her family begin to enjoy what she has not felt before – a sense of belonging, a sense of being a part of a community. While there are conflicts at times within her own family, particularly the stress surrounding her husband's beating her son as a slaveholder would and the choice Vyry has to make between commitment to a man made during slavery and the partner she acquires in freedom, Vyry nonetheless manages to envision a future, one without the uncertainty that usually portended for those recently freed from slavery.

In this prototypical neo-slave narrative, Walker limns a heroine who, while not aggressively challenging the status quo, nevertheless succeeds in carving out a space to be in a restrictive and restricting world. Unlike neo-slave narrative heroines who follow her, Vyry does not take up arms, lead rebellions, challenge slavemasters, or experience rape at the hands of her so-called owner. And yet Walker does not do away with the sexual violence altogether. It is Vyry's mother, who is subjected to repeated sexual abuse, who continues to bear the slaveowner's children, and whose death in childbirth opens the novel. With Vyry's propensity to coexist peaceably with those whose very presence is a threat to her and her family, Vyry validates the portion of history that documents survival over succumbing to the inhumanity of slavery. Like Sethe Suggs, Vyry gives a face to slavery and succeeds in grafting humanity onto an institution designed to deny that very humanity. In a way, Vyry marks

a revolution in self-emancipation from slavery even as the circumstances of black life in America marked a revolution in 1966, the year Vryy's story was published. It is therefore ironic in some ways that *Jubilee* frequently is viewed as being out of step with the tenets of the Black Arts Movement. As a black woman claiming her place in America both during and immediately following slavery, Vryy offers up an individualistic will to thrive against the backdrop of a period when invisibility might have been the favored course of action. In this reading, Vryy's very existence – as a sign that slavery did not ultimately destroy the spirits of black people – is itself quietly revolutionary. Walker thus set the stage for other writers to be even more aggressive in showcasing the humanity and ingenuity of black people in a world designed to ensure their status as second-class and disposable citizens.

Twenty years after *Jubilee*, Sherley Anne Williams took the next step; she makes her title character in *Dessa Rose* a revolutionary during slavery. Historically, any African American who dared to take up arms in an attempt to secure freedom during slavery came to one end: death – sometimes with dismemberment. The orality of folk history, however, holds out the possibility that at least one, and perhaps a few, of those enslaved actually rebelled and succeeded. Literary creation in *Dessa Rose*, therefore, joins hands with that folk possibility and creates a legendary figure of action in Dessa. When her master kills Kaine, the man she loves, Dessa is intent upon killing her owner. Sold for her attempt and chained on a coffle, she fights alongside those who liberate the group from their captors. Momentarily reminiscent of Ernest Gaines's Big Laura in a battle that takes place in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Dessa is even more striking in her ferociousness because she is in an advanced stage of pregnancy. And she lives to tell the tale, whereas Big Laura dies. That little window of possibility – defiance and then living to tell the tale – is what propels Williams's narrative and what it shares with Morrison's *Beloved* and, from a supernatural perspective, with Cooper's *Family*.

Dessa Rose fulfills the desire that folk historians and African American writers share: there must have been heroic models of defiance for black folks who were enslaved. If the only way that desire can be fulfilled is through literary creation, then so be it. The pleasure of reading assumes the function of the pleasure of listening in celebrating a woman and her comrades who made fools of those who succeeded as well as those who attempted to enslave them. The cultural work of this brand of neo-slave narrative is a soothing balance to the Historical accounts of persons enslaved. The text of literary creation finally supersedes the Texts of History and breathes hope and pride that look backwards to their inspiration as well as forward to their realization.

After her adventures with the coffle, Dessa finds herself chained in a cellar at the home of the local sheriff to whom she has been sold. A writer, Adam Nehemiah, gets permission to interview her for a book he is writing on how to control the slave population. Dessa tells her story to Nehemiah in spurts and starts as we get the first part of the narrative through his perspective, which reveals his animalistic stereotyping of Dessa (comparable to what schoolteacher and his nephews do to Sethe except that it is more commercially oriented). Believing himself to be a cut above and adviser to slaveholders, Nehemiah nonetheless adheres to all the strictures of the economy of slavery. Resorting to such tactics as denying Dessa food for three days and giving her only salty water to drink, Nehemiah is a flag-carrier for strictures and deprivation during slavery. It is pleasantly appropriate, therefore, that this man who believes he knows black people well enough to write their personalities into his self-help text is the victim of Dessa's rescue by two of her companions from the coffle.

Sharing significant details of her life with Nehemiah enables Dessa to tell without revealing, to set something outside her mind, as Zora Neale Hurston would say, for white folks to play with as she goes on about her business. Her brief and truncated narrative tidbits showcase her appeals to multiple audiences, a scenario comparable to the one that defined Chesnut's Uncle Julius when he delivered one message for John and another message for Annie and the reader. Through the gaps in her narrative as well as the very selectivity of what she elects to relate, Dessa exhibits a control that is apparent even as Nehemiah works hard to reinforce her status as an enslaved person. Seepages through Nehemiah's voice make clear the very humanity that Nehemiah seeks to repress, for Dessa repeatedly recounts her love for Kaine, her now-dead lover and the father of her child, as well as her general desire for freedom and her specific desire not to bring another child into the world of slavery. She also makes clear her understanding of human relationships, her sovereignty in the world in spite of slavery, and her sense of humor, which to Nehemiah is not something for which he has allowed in the composition of an enslaved person.

Once freed from the cellar and taken to the home of Ruth Elizabeth Carson Sutton ("Miss Rufel"), a white woman who allows runaways to live on and work her plantation, Dessa undergoes Ruth's scrutiny before Ruth learns to value Dessa and before Dessa learns to value the first possibility for friendship with a white woman. With this relationship, Williams achieves two things in her narrative that traditional History mostly elides. First, she uncovers the jealousy that existed between white women and attractive black women on plantations. An interesting reversal occurs here in that the jealousy is directed

from the black woman toward the white woman, and it centers upon Nathan, the black man who has positioned himself to be Miss Rufel's lover. What History mostly denied and what folk history could only imagine, Williams makes explicit. Where Harriet Jacobs was too bashful to discuss matters of sexuality during slavery, Williams uses the neo-slave narrative to put the stamp of mutual sexual desire on persons who could be attracted to each other in spite of race, class, or previous condition of servitude. And she is graphic in the depiction of that sexual desire.

Second, Williams anticipates the relationship between Sethe Suggs and Amy Denver in Morrison's *Beloved* in suggesting that there were circumstances in which white women and black women could work together for a common objective during slavery. Certainly black and white women could be competitors in the historical tensions surrounding the sexual interests of slaveholders, but they also had to work together for the smooth running of plantation households, which means they collaborated on everything from cooking to sewing to taking care of the sick. Also, instead of assuming that all white women were of one stripe, that is, acquiescent with white males in their domination of black people, Williams allows for the possibility of division on the basis of recognition of mutual humanity, for it is Ruth's acceptance of the fact that Dessa has been whipped and scarred in her private areas and Dessa's recognition that Ruth is just as susceptible to sexual exploitation as are black women that brings the two women to understandings that transcend the racial divide. At the most intimate level, Dessa finally accepts the fact that Ruth can nurse her son Mony as a result of Dessa's milk having dried up. Thus their plights as women subjected to the foibles of men, intentionally and unintentionally, lead to the allegiance that the women form to achieve their objective. That common objective moves the narrative from Ruth's sometimes skeptical assessment of Dessa to her control of her own narrative.

The story Dessa recounts is one of Ruth's working with Dessa and other blacks; they dupe slaveholders by selling themselves, escaping to rendezvous at certain places, and being sold again as they move through various towns and cities in the South earning the money necessary for them to join a wagon train going West. Dessa thus exhibits agency in the telling of her own narrative even as she captures the desired agency twentieth-century folk historians hoped for in the lives of enslaved persons. By telling her own story in the last part of the narrative, Dessa incorporates a kind of porch-sitting approach. She is relating the tales of the selling adventures from the vantage point of years and distance. She therefore invokes features of teller/audience interactions by embedding markers of identification and response for

her readers/hearers, such as “you know,”²⁴ “you know what I mean,”²⁵ “see,”²⁶ “you understand,”²⁷ “understand,”²⁸ “honey,”²⁹ “Oh, I tell you, honey, slavery was ugly,”³⁰ and “You see what I’m saying?,”³¹ a point made in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line*.³² In this post-slavery recounting, Dessa can incorporate elements of risk, humor, and success that might have been question marks at the times the actual adventures occurred. Her desire for escape from slavery and escape to the West having been fulfilled, she becomes a part of the future for which enslaved persons longed, and she becomes a part of the folk history about that future as projected from the vantage point of slavery as well as projected from the future back onto slavery.

In a couple of dramatic moments in resistance to slavery, Morrison’s Sethe proves to be just as resilient as Dessa Rose. Challenged initially to legitimate her marriage in a world where blacks cannot marry legally, Sethe moves from the small infraction of sewing a wedding dress to claiming her role as a mother, which is quintessentially oppositional to the status of any black enslaved female who gives birth. The “issue” of enslaved women was considered the property of their masters, a property about which they could have no say. But what, folk historians would maintain, about the women who claimed motherhood in spite of that restriction? Morrison answers that question in a woman who declares loudly and irrevocably that her children are her own.

Slavery as subject matter in Morrison’s hands, therefore, allows for engagement with myth and legend as in *Song of Solomon*, for transformation of motherhood and mothering as in *Beloved*, and for a focus on free and enslaved blacks as in *A Mercy* (2008), her most recent work. The mothering issue, however, reflects most vividly the defiance and resilience that define the neo-slave narrative. The majority of Sethe’s actions are motivated by her love for her children. When schoolteacher and his nephews milk the pregnant Sethe after they have marked her “human” and “animal” characteristics in their notebooks, Sethe’s one thought is to get to her nursing daughter Beloved, who has been sent to Cincinnati ahead of Sethe. Her trek through the woods in spite of being beaten severely, the misery she encounters there, and the meeting with Amy Denver are all informed by her efforts to reach her nursing child and to salvage her pregnancy if possible.

Although Amy Denver is young, naive, and inexperienced in assisting in birthing processes, she nonetheless fills the bill for Sethe’s delivery of the child she appropriately names Denver in honor of her mysterious and soon-to-vanish helper. As with Ruth and Dessa, it is the innocence of a child untainted by slavery that brings the two women together. That innocence enables them to work together in an environment that has set them up to be natural

enemies. Finding their common humanity and acting on it is what the women do best. Having made that essential point, Amy Denver's role in the narrative ceases once Denver is born. The joint project, though, solidifies the legitimacy that Sethe claims as a mother, for, in that wilderness, Amy Denver and Sethe Suggs can celebrate a birth without the strictures of slavery informing their interactions or demanding that customary status positions supersede humanity. Amy Denver serves, therefore, to encourage Sethe on her path to claiming motherhood and acting on that claim.

What would an enslaved woman who had escaped do, folk historians might have postulated, when faced with the possibility of having her children remanded to slavery? Would she have killed those children rather than have them taken back to that horror? Oral tradition might have imagined such women doing precisely that – just as there are folk tales of women inducing abortions in order not to bring children into slavery. Sharing kinship with Dessa Rose's lack of desire to give birth to a child who will be enslaved, but going one step farther by acting on that desire, Sethe claims an ultimate power, that of death over life. When she kills Beloved and attempts to kill her other children, Sethe is assuming the kind of authority that could elevate her to slaveholder or goddess. While Morrison runs the risk of having Sethe compared to slaveholders in her deciding who should live or die, she separates Sethe from that comparison by the consideration of intentionality. Sethe's intent to save her children as best she can takes precedence over her assuming ownership over them. Indeed, societies generally grant to human beings, especially mothers, the right to protect their children at all costs. To Sethe, her method for saving her children is that all-costs method of protection.

Arguably, Sethe achieves a kind of suprahuman status in her actions in the novel and earns as much legendary status perhaps as Solomon in *Song of Solomon* – at least among the residents on Blue Stone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio. The possible suprahumanity in Sethe echoes the suprahumanity manifested in Beloved's return, and it anticipates the extranatural quality that dominates J. California Cooper's depiction of slavery and enslaved persons in *Family*. Both reflect that, in contemplating slavery, folk historians and literary artists fill in the gaps in knowledge about how black people lived and survived under outrageous conditions. Beloved the revenant makes clear the haunting power of slavery, whether that haunting is in the ghostly realm or in the realm of rememory. The power Beloved has over Sethe, Paul D, and Denver highlights the lasting effect of slavery on anyone touched by it. Beloved's extranatural appearance and her hard-to-explain actions and knowledge about what happened before her death are all parts of the lingering impact of slavery upon a

people and their imaginations for a hundred years after the atrocities. In the absence of easy ways to account for such human cruelty to other human beings, perhaps the realm of the extranatural is the only one in which responses to those conditions can be developed.

Question marks surrounding *Beloved* as of this world or not do not plague Cooper's *Family*. Clora, the central character there, is an enslaved woman who transcends slavery to exist in a space beyond death but not quite eternity. Clora's mother Fammy positions her daughter for trouble when she kills her master and herself in order to prevent the master from raping the young Clora. Clora is immediately raped by the master's son and eventually gives birth to six children by him. When her mistress confronts Clora about her children's resemblance to the master, Clora fights back and realizes that she is liable to severe punishment. She is also troubled because her oldest daughter, Always, has reached the age where she is about to be sexually violated by her master, just as Clora herself was. Clora therefore plans to turn her entire family into "Flying Africans" by plotting suicide for them. She goes into the woods, locates poisonous roots, makes a soup of them, and feeds the soup to herself and her children. Unfortunately, Clora is the only one to "die." She ascends into an extranatural realm from which she can watch over her children (and others who are enslaved) but not speak to them or have any control over their existences. Her narrative, then, is a record of a mother's constant grief with a brief exultation. She witnesses one daughter's rape and another daughter's being run over by a wagon. She can only watch and record, relating her tale in a manner comparable to Dessa Rose's by indicating that she is constantly aware of audience. She tells her story with an emotion and poignancy that tugs at the heartstrings of all her readers/hearers. In her not-here-but-not-quite-there stage, she observes her children and the several generations following them. Mostly they suffer, though one marries well and passes for white. The major consolation for Clora is that she finally claims to be the mother of humankind, thus linking her in a mythic way to Sethe's more temporal claiming of motherhood.

Clora constructs her narrative in the oral/folk tradition, one in which she calls for witnesses and support from the audience reading/listening to her tale:

She addresses her audience as "you" and cultivates familiarity with it by using such expressions as "you know," "I'm telling you this," "you see," "bear with me," "chile," and "I'm telling you." She invites her audience to "see" on several occasions as if she is literally pointing out something or indicating that she is in the colloquial, casual mode of explaining something. The interrogative mode serves to hold readers' attention and invite them more

intensely into the narrative, as in “Do you know what happened?” (35) and “You know what I did?” (222). She works the emotional register with questions such as “Ain’t that something sad?” (30) when a young man is beaten to death for learning to read and “Oh, do you know a mother’s heart?” (43) when she observes the punishment her children receive.³³

For Clora, as for Sethe, motherhood is the driving force for her actions. While her attempted killings of her children fall short, her motivations and intentions are comparable to Sethe’s, and they echo the sentiments of Dessa Rose. Each enslaved mother claims the right to take her children out of slavery, and each is constantly concerned about the welfare of her children. These characters collectively reiterate that tearing families apart during slavery did not leave mothers who accepted those separations as they would losing a few strands of hair – as slaveholders Historically might want us to believe. Instead, these characters put the humanity back into the mothering, even if that humanity yields the complexity of mothers desiring death for their children over enslavement.

As narrator, Clora shows kinship to the roles of contemporary novelists of the neo-slave narrative. While they cannot change the facts of slavery, they can showcase a belief in the resilience and defiance of persons who lived under the condition of slavery. In these instances, their cultural work takes the form of reinstituting motherhood, occasionally recombining families that were destroyed Historically, and generally putting the human back into a system of dehumanization. At times it takes representation through extranatural means in order to reveal that humanity. The constant, however, is the belief that, for all its range and power, slavery could be overcome, mostly in small ways, but overcome nonetheless. Ultimately, in spite of the death and violence these narratives depict in showing these women during slavery, the narratives are hopeful. When Sethe recognizes that she is her own best thing, when Clora declares her overarching motherhood, when Dessa celebrates her westward movement and survival, and when Vry calls her chicks to surround her, the dominant strand is hope and a quiet triumph projected into the future.

Vry Brown, Dessa Rose, Sethe Suggs, and Clora all experience slavery directly and chronologically simultaneously with slavery. Another feature of neo-slave narratives is depicting characters in the twentieth century who are whisked back into slavery or for whom slavery is so dominant in their imaginations that they have difficulty living healthy lives in the twentieth century. For Dana Franklin in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* and Elizabeth “Lizzie” Dubose in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*, the bodily experiences of their ancestors become their own bodily experiences. For John Washington in

David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* and Ursa Corregidora in *Corregidora*, the haunted lives of the enslaved dominate the contemporary lives of these characters. In these narratives, slavery is just as haunting as it was for those newly released from bondage, and in some ways it might be viewed as even more haunting.

Haunting presupposes an extranatural realm, and that is precisely what dominates in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*. Newly wed Dana Franklin, at home in southern California, has no logical explanation for how she ends up in early nineteenth-century Maryland on the plantation owned by the father of one of her white ancestors, Rufus Weylin. The multiple times she is magically drawn there, each time to save Rufus's life, it is just as if she were born contemporarily with slavery, for that time period is intact. Dana must learn how to act enslaved, how to keep her twentieth-century technological developments and her reading knowledge hidden, and how to survive in an environment that is completely alien to her. Without the "safety" of the twentieth century, she is just as susceptible to beatings as are her fellows, and she experiences a horrific hiding. Throughout, she must learn how to negotiate slavery without losing her soul to it. Caught in a magical set of circumstances that are historically logical but utterly beyond her control, Dana can have no viable life in the twentieth century until her issues in the past are resolved.

So too with Lizzie Dubose in *Stigmata*. After inheriting a trunk in late twentieth-century Tuskegee, Alabama, Lizzie explores its contents to discover a quilt and a diary from two of her ancestors. Sleeping under the quilt places her into the lives of her grandmother as well as her great-great-grandmother. She experiences the pain of Ayo being stolen from her mother in Africa, then placed on a ship and brought to the New World, where she is beaten to the point of death for not understanding the directives of her new mistress. Lizzie also experiences the pain of Grace, her grandmother, who has become the intermediary for Ayo's pain. Thus whipped by memories of Ayo and Grace, and suffering the physical wounds (back, ankles, wrists) and pain of both women, Lizzie becomes a mental wreck who spends fourteen years in mental institutions before she learns to accept these communications with and from the past as gifts rather than simply punishments.

Neither Dana nor Lizzie can be allowed to forget her history and her family heritage. By drawing them back into the past, their ancestors, both black and white, reiterate the value of familial and cultural history. Dana, in her interracial marriage, must confront the fact that she cannot harmonize all of the past into a bleached-out present. In her insulated middle-classness, Lizzie also learns that her ancestors were far, far from being so privileged and that they

have as much claim on her present as she does. In contrast to the directive in *Beloved* that “this is not a story to pass on,” both Dana and Lizzie learn that if the stories are not passed on verbally, then they will make physical claim on the descendants of the persons who are the subjects of those narratives. The lesson is particularly vivid for Dana, because she loses a portion of her left arm upon her last trip to Maryland, a trip in which she is forced to kill Rufus when he attempts to rape her. Rememory is respect, but it also carries with it the possibility for reconciliation and healing of psychological and physical wounds; part of Dana’s arm may be gone, but she is at peace with her ancestors, her husband, and herself. As long as she is alive, they, who have been previously unnamed and unknown to her, will also live. Instead of contemporary blacks being trunks and branches without roots, and instead of them believing that the past is merely the past, they are forced to accept – and then embrace – the claims that the past makes upon them.

Literary history in the context of these narratives becomes a teaching device, a piece of the puzzle of African American existence upon United States soil. They are a balm against short-term memory loss, a caution against assuming that people of African descent have truly arrived and are being assimilated into the body politic of so-called democratic America. Lest the issue with short-term memory seem trite, a relatively recent case will serve to make the point clear. When Spike Lee completed *Malcolm X* (1992), in which Denzel Washington starred in the title role, many young blacks translated the “X” as the number “ten” (perhaps they at least deserve credit for recognizing a Roman numeral). If these young people, merely three decades removed from the life and times of Malcolm X, did not know who he was, then one can only suppose what they do *not* know about slavery and general African American history. Neo-slave narratives, therefore, provide an entrée into history for many readers, an entrée that they might bolster with more serious study of the subject. For example, when Morrison used Sethe to stamp an individualistic face on motherhood in slavery, many readers were inclined to learn more about how pregnant women were treated during slavery, which means in turn that they learned about African Americans generally during slavery.

Dana’s and Lizzie’s bodies become the contemporary statements of the horrors of slavery, and they make slavery a living reality / nightmare for these women. Ursa Corregidora is locked into memories of slavery because of motherlove. Her grandmother and great-grandmother were raped by the same Brazilian slaveholder, who then turned them into prostitutes. Observing no morality that would prevent him from having sex with his daughters and granddaughters, Corregidora the slaveholder burned family

records in an effort to erase his heathenish actions. To counter that erasure, the women vowed to give birth to daughters and to pass on the narrative to their daughters; thus the story has come down to Ursa. Her family history in slavery and immediately following, however, is a tremendous burden to Ursa, who has difficulty imagining what life will be like when she is made barren after being pushed down a flight of stairs. The past intrudes into the present in this narrative in psychologically oppressive ways and not for any good reason that can be identified. Certainly remembering the past is an admirable objective, but the past here highlights a violent, white male ancestor who provides nothing beyond his violence. Memory is not for the sake of healing, for it carries an aura of vengeance rather than self-revelation or self-improvement. Nor is it for the sake of claiming a break from the past; indeed, it imprisons more than it frees and ties Ursa more to a static history rather than to a dynamic one. Her challenge is to put the past into perspective, to recognize that her own body cannot continue to be the instrument for retaining negative historical memory, that she, as an individual, has a right to move forward no matter how horribly her ancestors were treated. At times, it seems as if locking Ursa into the pattern of the past is all her ancestors want.

Ursa must find a way to compartmentalize the memories without them destroying her future. She must find another means of procreation once her body is no longer capable of that feat. It seems, by novel's end, that she has accepted music as her medium of creation instead of her body. Whereas Dana and Lizzie must be brought into acceptance of what happened to their female ancestors, Ursa has accepted that history all along. What she must do in the narrative is put it in perspective, to push aside the weight of the past and make space for herself instead of living her life exclusively for her ancestors. In *Corregidora*, those ancestors are not as immediately present as they are in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, but they are infinitely more imprisoning and strikingly more selfish. It is to Ursa's credit, therefore, that she can finally honor them and move on with her life.

A similar challenge exists for John Washington in *The Chaneyville Incident* by David Bradley. John is a twentieth-century history professor who is obsessed with what happened to a group of enslaved persons who escaped into the infamous South County of Pennsylvania. The group was led by C.K. Washington, John's great-grandfather, and included the love of C.K.'s life, from whom he had been separated years before and with whom he was reunited briefly before the escaping group was surrounded by pursuing whites. The mystery of his family history has come to John through his father Moses, a moonshiner who disappeared mysteriously, and Old Jack, Moses's

best friend and running buddy. John believes that he can uncover what happened to C.K. and the others if he just keeps searching through factual sources, deducing courses of action, and drawing conclusions. He places ultimate value on his superior intellect and intelligence, both of which separate him from Judith, his psychiatrist, white, live-in lover. Research into what has happened to the runaways finally shapes the outcome of the romantic relationship, just as Dana's and Kevin's relationship in *Kindred* is solidified by their encounters with slavery. Transformation in the novel, therefore, comes from understanding and accepting history, filling in the gaps where necessary, and recognizing that those filled-in gaps are just as valid as factual History.

John allows his Historical research to put considerable stress upon his personal and familial relationships. He is so consumed by History that he not only cannot imagine history – at least not initially – but places little value on what the folk might have to say. Convinced that he will find some factual, objective information about what happened to the runaways, he persists in his quest almost to the point of psychological destruction, manifested in his constant drinking and in a bone-penetrating cold that he never seems to escape. It is only when he rejects formal History for folk history that he can reclaim himself and give a new folk life to the thirteen runaways. This takes place after John buries Old Jack and moves into his cabin. Believing that John will never return to Philadelphia, Judith goes after him, and, like Kevin in *Kindred*, becomes involved in the process of uncovering the past. She and John succeed in locating the burial site of C.K. and the twelve others who, when surrounded, committed suicide rather than be taken back into slavery – or so John imagines. They became, as Angelita Reyes posits, “Flying Africans.” Once John asserts the validity of folk creation and begins to participate in it, he can “see” what has happened to the runaways and share the full story with Judith after they return to Old Jack's cabin. And he finally gets warm, which is the surest testament that his assessment of the folk history is accurate. In a symbolic final gesture, John burns his notes, pens, ink, and pencils in recognition that his folk imagination, the story he has woven for Judith about C.K. and the others, is equally as and perhaps more valid than History.

Like J. California Cooper's Clora, in many ways John serves a function comparable to that of contemporary novelists who tackle the neo-slave narrative. It is only by moving away from recorded History and into the realm of possibility contained in folk history that he can present a narrative comparable to the ones that Old Jack has told him throughout the novel. Instead of looking for a story that makes logical, Historical sense, John learns

to trust the story that rings true, no matter its imaginative origins. In portraying characters during slavery, authors of the neo-slave narrative learn to trust their senses of the human will to be free – in spite of obstacles with which those enslaved might have been confronted. The power of imagination in the end yields a greater truth about a people's will to survive, thrive, and produce generations.

The dominance of slavery as a theme in post-1960 African American literature makes it at once an excruciatingly difficult subject about which to write and one with which many writers are obviously rather comfortable. That comfort manifests itself in the lighter treatments of this serious subject and at times in a light-heartedness that overlies serious treatment. Two writers who fit into this category of neo-slave narrative development are Ishmael Reed in *Flight to Canada* and Charles Johnson in *Oxherding Tale* as well as in *Middle Passage*; together with Reed's text, the latter of Johnson's novels will serve for commentary here. Any reader of the satiric *Flight to Canada* will easily recognize Reed's parody of the slave narrative tradition, even as he is engaged in serious commentary. The same is true with Johnson in *Middle Passage*.

The story of a poem entitled "Flight to Canada," Reed's novel features Raven Quickskill, the composer of the poem and the escaper from Southern slavery. The use of anachronism in the novel renders a literal interpretation of its title in that Quickskill takes an airplane ride out of slavery. Among the many incongruous occurrences in the text, the novel features enslaved persons listening to Abraham Lincoln's speeches on the radio, as well as references to psychiatrists on Park Avenue, songs from Broadway shows ("Hello, Dolly"), cars, and Valium. It also features a black woman, Mammy Barracuda, who aligns herself with Rebels and attends a convention of Confederate Soldiers where she sings "Dixie." In addition, Abraham Lincoln visits Arthur Swille, the plantation owner, from whom he requests funds to continue financing the Union cause in the Civil War. With known Historical figures as well as historical types such as plantation owners, Reed uncovers the seamier sides of slavery and asserts perversion and crassness throughout the institution. He hints at a sexual liaison between the plantation owner, Arthur Swille, and Mammy Barracuda, and between Swille and his sister (echoes of Edgar Allen Poe, a reading of whose poetry occurs in the text). Further, he paints the plantation mistress as an anorexic and frivolous entity whose only use is in approving dinner menus, arranging flowers, and appearing as directed to receive "toasts to the lady." There are also hints of perversion in her relationship to Mammy Barracuda. On the side of recouping black intelligence, Reed depicts a seemingly acquiescent faithful retainer, Uncle

Robin, who finagles his way into owning the plantation upon Swille's death. Uncle Robin and his wife Aunt Judy become the rightful heirs of the house and land that have been built and cultivated with black labor.

For Reed, no part of slavery is too troublesome to depict, no part too sacred. There is a certain irreverence here; everything and everyone associated with the institution is fair game. In his hands, the absurdity of slavery justifies its representation in the equally absurd. Moreover, it is part of his overall critique of racial politics in the United States. That era may have been horrible, but it reveals no less complicity among whites in power, such as Lincoln and Swille, than twentieth-century racial politics. Reed thereby debunks the myth that Lincoln was a cut above others or that the mythology surrounding his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation should hold undue sway in the lives of African Americans. He lifts the veil of black sexual studding during slavery and makes one of his escapees a successful porn star. He unapologetically broaches the subject that some blacks were complicit in slavery even as he trounces the notion of lack of black creativity and ingenuity during the period. Raven Quickskill, Uncle Robin, and others provide ample ammunition that many blacks competed well intellectually during slavery. To Reed, the institution of slavery may be iconic for its shaping of African American lives and culture, but his use of the parodic mode raises questions about whether realism is sufficient for readers seeking to comprehend the full meaning of slavery today, nearly 150 years after its official end.

In *Middle Passage*, Johnson depicts a scamp, Rutherford Calhoun, whose thieving escapades and resistance to marriage land him on a slaver bound from New Orleans to Africa to bring fresh human cargo into New World markets. Against the backdrop of Rutherford's scheming actions is an exploration of African American connections to African heritage. Rutherford's most significant encounter is with representatives of the tribe of Allmuseri, a mythical group that Johnson creates and that appears in several of his texts. With a background as legendary as that of the Flying Africans, the Allmuseri are a collective unit that cannot imagine conflict or individuality, which is quite a contrast to Rutherford. The slavers on the ship have committed a cardinal sin by daring to capture the Allmuseri god and chaining that deity in the hole of their ship. Through an extranatural encounter with that force, Rutherford is transformed from his petty views and thieving approach to life to recentering his sense of value. After incredible trials at sea, including death and cannibalism, Rutherford returns to New Orleans content to marry Isadora, the woman he has gone to sea to escape and who has actually had a financial hand in bringing about his adventures as a slave trader.

For Johnson, slavery provides the opportunity for philosophical reflections under the superficial guise of following the narrative of a rogue. Those reflections center upon the nature of being in the world and whether that being is informed by African or American notions of the supernatural. They raise fundamental issues such as the nature of loyalty and commitment, the principles that guide an individual's life, the complicity of black persons in the slave trade, and the morality that governs – or not – the financing of the slave trade. Slavery for Johnson is a very large canvas on which he paints the nature of owning human beings against the backdrop of the distinctive nature of humanity.

Reed and Johnson remind us that slavery, especially as it was fed by racist practices within the United States, also fed a rich, double-edged tradition of humor. Humor was a central, highly creative means through which African Americans survived and confronted centuries of oppression. Nevertheless, this persistent tradition in black folk culture – it has sustained the careers of generations of black entertainers from Moms Mabley and Richard Pryor to Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock more recently – can sponsor an uncontrollable reification of stereotypes. As Glenda Carpio has noted, it can at once be a strong critique of racial injustice,³⁴ but at the same time “give life to the whole storehouse of fantasies produced in the hothouse of a racially divisive past and an equally – if differently – divisive present.”³⁵ Reed and Johnson challenge the reader to better understand the problematic relationship between an African American racial history and humor, which may indeed “complicate the distinctions between polite and popular representations of slavery.”³⁶ Speaking of *Flight to Canada*, Carpio suggests that the novel “makes vivid the infinitely complex layers of associations embedded in stereotypes and gives access to the emotions, often conflicting and violent, that they provoke.”³⁷ This idea is equally true in the case of Johnson's *Middle Passage*.

Sustained engagement with slavery continues in the twenty-first century in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones's 2003 novel. While it joins antecedent texts in its primary focus on slavery, it adds a significant twist. It is the first narrative in which an African American writer documents the holding of enslaved persons by an individual of African descent. It therefore uncovers an additional unpleasantness about slavery. There is certainly Historical documentation that some African Americans owned others. That part of slavery, however, has not previously captured the imaginations of African American writers. If one of the major impetuses to the neo-slave narrative is to give agency and complex humanity to enslaved persons, then perhaps that impulse could not easily reconcile the idea of black

people as villains, as being as power hungry and as cruel as whites. It was much easier to imagine villains in white face. Even more preposterous would have been to present the idea of slaveholding blacks not as villainy, but as an accepted practice. That is the uncharted territory onto which Jones steps in *The Known World*. It is, among several strands of narratives, the story of a black man who owns other blacks and feels no guilt and has no second thoughts about doing so. When necessary, he punishes the blacks on his plantation just as cruelly – including beatings, cropping ears, and hobbling – as neighboring, slaveholding whites would.

Henry Townsend is a man who was born into and grew up in slavery in Manchester, Virginia, in a created county that Jones has imagined for his narrative. Henry's freedom is purchased – painfully – by his parents, who earlier succeeded in purchasing themselves. Having remained on the plantation long enough to identify thoroughly with its white owner, William Robbins, and choosing him as a model over his parents, Augustus and Mildred Townsend, Henry is an affront to everything in which his parents believe. His father is so shocked when he learns that Henry has purchased a man that he strikes him across the shoulders with a cane. The deed is unimaginable to Augustus because Henry knows how desperately enslaved blacks desire freedom. He has been with Augustus and Mildred when they mailed an enslaved woman to New York with some of the walking canes Augustus made, because they recognized how determined she was to be free. To think that their own son could so easily forget what slavery means in terms of violence and denial of freedom and to embrace it for what it offers in terms of privilege and ownership is the ultimate insult to Augustus and Mildred. They retain contact with their son, but they never spend a night inside his plantation home, preferring instead to sleep in the quarters when they come for periodic visits.

The white plantation owner Robbins makes the first human purchase for Henry and teaches him how to treat Moses, his new property. Initially Henry, in the manner of many white children who had black friends during plantation days and after, believes that he can treat Moses with some measure of equality. Robbins very quickly teaches him otherwise, and Henry proves to be an apt student. He marries Caldonia, an attractive mulatta in the area, befriends Robbins's two children by his black mistress, and becomes the best student the local teacher whom Robbins hires to educate him has ever taught. He steps easily into the society modeled by local mulattoes after white plantation owners. He adopts their values, their prejudices, and their elision of morality. Though he imagines himself a more humane owner of human beings than

whites are – or so Caldonia tries to argue in her memories of Henry – there is little evidence in the text to show that division. Henry is, by all measures, a successful plantation owner and barterer in human flesh. At the time of his death, he owns thirty-three other blacks.

Henry's death occurs early in the narrative, and it is through flashbacks from various characters that the story of Henry's life is revealed. That technique is noteworthy, for it distances readers in a small way from the implicit horrors of contemplating the implications of a black person owning other blacks in a system that was one of the most repressive to black humanity practiced anywhere in the world. Readers do not have to see Henry except in memory, and that is powerful enough in itself. Questions about how Henry's values came to be so warped – if that is the conclusion readers draw – are set in the context of a society of aspiring, light-skinned blacks who believe that they have as much right to be slaveholders as whites. The psychology that dominates the narrative, therefore, is one that pushes history and morality that readers bring to the text into the background. They are forced instead to witness the lives of privileged blacks in a world in Manchester, Virginia, during slavery, when those blacks lived much better than some classes of whites and certainly much better than the local Native Americans.

What does it mean for African American literary creativity in the neo-slave narrative sub-tradition, therefore, when the major and most monstrous villains come with black faces? Does that mean that the subject matter is so commonplace that it no longer needs to adhere to but can deviate from the theme of empowering enslaved blacks? Does this mean that the entire practice of slavery needs to be reconsidered as not simply black versus white, but humans of greater force and finances versus humans of lesser force and finances? Does this mean that class and color are greater forces of identification within African American communities than common blackness? What does it mean for decades of history of African American culture to be predicated upon the assumption that whites kept blacks down in America for hundreds of years only to discover that some blacks aggressively kept black folks down as well? Jones's twist on the neo-slave narrative charts new territory for contemplation of African American culture just as it charts new territory for the usual subject and standard approach in the neo-slave narrative. In the hands of most neo-slave narrators, History is never secure; it shapeshifts and allows for possibilities that previous documentation did not usually allow. In Jones's hands, however, even folk history is not so secure; the idea of black victimization and white victimizers is also brought into challenge, as is the moral superiority usually believed to be implicit in black subjects. Most disturbing, the very

basis of morality that makes – or is presumed to make – slavery unacceptable to most humanity is brought into question.

The neo-slave narrative generally enables characters to find agency in almost impossible circumstances, a pattern that prevails for many of the authors covered here. One novel, however, while not formally labeled slave or neo-slave narrative, nonetheless follows a figurative pattern of extrication from servitude that evokes the neo-slave narrative sub-genre. That novel is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Celie's oppression in a male/female pattern of domination is comparable to that of white/black domination during slavery. Like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Celie must find a way to save herself from her degrading circumstances of sexual and physical violation. In a sequence that is not unlike a slave narrative, Celie begins to develop an awareness of the possibilities of freedom with the arrival and tutelage of Shug Avery, Albert's former girlfriend who had rejected him but now, down and out and sick, needs a place to live.

The power of the domestic culture becomes apparent as Shug and Celie form a bond; both women possess and feed off their creativity, which is ultimately what allows them to rise above their circumstances, and through which they are able to realize their inner (and outer) humanity. Shug's music deepens the novel's structure as well, turning it into a blues composition in the tradition of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which the narrator, through the act of telling his tale, comes to understand what he did to be so black and blue. Ellison asserts the philosophy of singing from pain to transcendence, from trouble to lightheartedness. In order for Celie to develop her "voice," she must learn to manage both. Shug, then, is the true agent of her transformation from slavery to freedom just as she is the agent of her transformation from dependence on God to a re-formation of spirituality.

The "escape" portion of this narrative comes when Shug is well enough to leave and takes Celie with her. The move to the city of Memphis helps speed up her transformation. There Celie develops more fully her "voice"; as an entrepreneur, she gives expression to her creativity, which increases her agency. Celie thus seems to manage both – going from pain to transcendence, from trouble to lightheartedness – by creating/narrating her state of the blues and arriving at a reflective transcendence of it. This voice, more sophisticated and complete, that Celie acquires in relating her tale is perhaps her ultimate triumph over the destructive forces that have dominated her life for so long. She acquires the power to make Harpo look ridiculous, and she acquires the power to humanize Albert. Her textual audience, especially Shug, elevates Celie's narrative to one that echoes the dynamic in *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God, and her letters suggest an external audience that again echoes what the narrator achieves in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

While the novel's heart-wrenching scenes make it difficult to see a balance in the narrative, Walker is very careful to create dichotomies, synthesizing seeming opposites. The pain in the book exists alongside various bouts of humor, for example. Celie experiences much laughter with other women – Sofia, Shug, Jerene, and Darlene. Despite the fact that Albert beats Celie, Shug loves him. The presence of this duality, as an expression of an African/black Southern worldview, helps to explain how Celie rises from abuse and violation to health and affirmation. But Walker goes one step further. Unlike the slave narrative, Walker's revision of the historical slave narrative requires those who have escaped to return to face their abusers and exploiters. Transformation is not complete until the domestic culture can absorb the changes in a demonstrable way. Thus freedom is not an individual act; it exists within a communal context where its power to transform can be more fully realized. Not only does Walker's revisionist narrative uncover a hidden history, but we witness the triumph of a woman's voice in the narrative process.

When Margaret Walker unknowingly opened the floodgates to African American treatments of slavery in 1966, few could have contemplated where that initial foray would lead or where it appears to be heading currently. A few things are certain. One is that African American writers find the landscape of slavery an attractive one on which to rewrite, reconsider, and reenvision History. Another is that their literary creations become symbolic restructurings of the forces that have shaped black lives. In addition, they are able to inculcate a sense of pride in an institution that folk history almost makes it impossible to take pride in. Most important, they are able to capture the defiance and resilience that common sense, minus documentation, tells us must have prevailed among enslaved populations. The writers themselves are the living testimony to that defiance and resilience, for clearly slavery did not finally destroy a people, its culture, or its creativity.

For African Americans, who, for the longest time, were denied the privilege of working to solidify the facts of their own history, the realm of imagination took over to create alternative histories that sometimes intersected with recorded History and sometimes not. What has remained constant is that those alternatives, as Ralph Ellison asserted of the African American folk tradition, have enabled black people in America to trust their own sense of reality instead of allowing others to shape it for them. Trusting one's own sense of reality, whether in folk narrative, oral histories, or fictional constructs, is ultimately a creative, historical, and factual process.

Notes

1. Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (New York: Vintage 1989), pp. 86–87.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
3. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), p. 80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
6. Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970), p. 188.
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Redefining the art of poetry

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In June 1926 W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes addressed two different audiences in two different venues on the subject of Art, especially the relationship of Art to Race. In his lecture, "The Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois, speaking to members of the NAACP, defined the terms by which he expected Negro American art production to further the organization's radical, reformist sociopolitical goals. "Beauty," said Du Bois, "[must] set the world right."¹ In other words, Art is Beauty, but Beauty is contingent – the conditions under which Beauty may be appreciated must be created. Art must first be artful. In his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which appeared in *The Nation*, Hughes attempted to redefine the position of the artist in relation to his art, his identity, and his community. Hughes decried the debased condition of American audiences, black and white, who routinely applied racial criteria to affirm or dismiss the artistic accomplishments of Negro artists – a condition he believed was certain to negatively affect the artistic values of the artists themselves. Hughes's famous declaration is equal parts manifesto and exasperation:

We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.²

Du Bois's call for a strategic Negro art and a championing of art which advanced a prescribed general good, and Hughes's declaration on behalf of the artist as a self-determining imaginative force struggling to rise above the limitations of public taste, would soon boil down to a static competition of principles: art as the handmaid of the collective good versus the artist as arbiter. Simply viewed, these competing ideas formed the standards for the cultural valuing not only of African American art, but also of the artists themselves. On the fundamentals, however, Du Bois and Hughes were in

agreement: the radical agenda of the NAACP was integration and assimilation of African Americans into the diverse weave of American culture; the optimism of the New Negro Movement as expressed in Hughes's plaint and manifesto was grounded in the same expectation. The persistence of lynching and other gross inequities of a Jim Crow society were placed alongside the frenzy of uplift activities taking place: the emergence of black colleges, influential church communities, the expansion of a powerful Negro press, the varied and numerous accomplishments of Negroes. Full citizenship was to be had through vigilance, activism, civic responsibility, documentation and denunciation of white intolerance, hard work, and moral rectitude. Black optimism was not predicated upon naiveté; it was built on a painstaking litany of black accomplishment. The Negro would prove his value and, on that basis, forge a new social contract with America, neatly resolving the Du Bois/Hughes binary.

If optimism among blacks was primarily constructed upon representations of the tenuous successes of the Negro middle class and on a vision of a rising Talented Tenth of the black population, its hold on the collective black imagination would quickly erode with the persistent clash of new narratives. America's emergence as an international symbol of moral leadership and defender of human rights following two world wars invoked a narrative of a nation intolerant of routine lynching and black disfranchisement, a nation willing to display its repugnance for such acts. A new black consciousness of self-worth forged in struggle from the Civil War through Emancipation, Jim Crow, two world wars, and the effort to bring about change through a non-violent Civil Rights Movement created a narrative of black America as the moral conscience of a dissolute nation. Margaret Walker could write in 1942, "We have been believers in the black gods of an old land ... /And in the white gods of a new land we have been believers believing in the mercy of our masters ... /Neither the slavers' whip nor the lynchers' rope nor the bayonet could kill our black belief ... /Now ... our fists bleed against the bars with a strange insistency."³ The "bars" signify conditions that prevent oppressed people from asserting their full humanity. Nikki Giovanni, in her autobiographical poem "Adulthood" first published in *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1967), takes this rupture even further. The poem's persona resolves the cognitive dissonance between a culture of violence and a personal outrage resulting in the rejection of white- or European-inspired rituals and lifestyles:

for a while progress was being made along with a certain
degree of happiness ...

then/hammeraskjold was killed/and lumumba was killed
and diem was killed/and kennedy was killed
and malcolm was killed ...⁴

Giovanni's longer list is international, indicating a general deterioration of Western culture into violence, war, and suppression of the people. The rupture was complete. The perception of America as an increasingly imperialist and dangerous presence in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Cuba encouraged the sense that blacks, long portrayed as the inferior race and culture and in need of moral guidance, were the moral example. Giovanni draws a direct connection between casualties of liberation movements and the end of assimilationism. The rejection of white models presented the ultimate creative problem – the need to reinvent one's self, one's institutions, one's voice, free of the old assumptions and inherited paradigms of submission and dominance.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) asserted a more extreme version of Du Bois's argument, demanding, in Larry Neal's words, that the black artist "link his work to the struggle for his liberation and the liberation of his brothers and sisters ... The artist and the political activist are one."⁵ This led to an active intolerance for artists pursuing an art outside of these expectations, an intolerance for the autonomy for which Hughes had advocated. However the BAM's efforts to articulate the goals and strategies of liberation art generated fresh investigations into matters of race, identity, gender, nation, sexuality, class, space, voice, love, and power. Many poets were informed and inspired by the BAM manifesto but not ruled by it. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) Alice Walker insists upon the value of black literature and black writers without denouncing white writers or their art. Her seminal essay "Looking for Zora," which records her search to restore the works of Zora Neale Hurston to the American canon, emphasized the importance of recovering the works of early African American artists, writers, and scholars. June Jordan (1936–2003), Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, and many others wrote within, through, beyond, and despite the strictures of BAM's pronouncements. Women writers, conscious of the implications of their multiple identities, including race, gender, nation, and sexuality, would find the politics of the Black Arts Movement too narrow and prescriptive. When Neal declared to *Ebony* magazine readers in 1969 that "[what we need is] an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated Future,"⁶ he did not have women in mind.

Neal's articulation of the BAM's ideals had clearly resonated with Don L. Lee (later Haki R. Madhubuti), who had already self-published his first poetry effort, *Think Black*, in 1966. Appearing first as a mimeographed

self-publication, then a year later as a staple-back Broadside Press publication, *Think Black* fulfilled a fundamental tenet of the BAM philosophy, one shared by Dudley Randall, founder of Broadside Press, that black art should be affordable to black audiences of limited means. This ethic, unfortunately, is not apparent in *Ground Work: New and Selected Poems* (1996); however, the volume makes these earlier works available and, taken together, the collected works reveal Lee's consistency of method over more than thirty years of writing. Always presuming a black reader, Lee prefaced each book of poems with instructive materials. The construction of these books – the politically instructive preface, the teaching function of the creative work wrapped in the implied ethics of low-cost production values – contributed to Lee's production of art that was both deliberate and deliberative.

Think Black was a slim book. Two poems, "Wake-Up Niggers (you ain't part Indian)" and "Re-Act for Action (for brother H. Rap Brown)," are early examples of Lee's adherence to the BAM's philosophy of art as a tool of liberation, and its requirements for theme, structure, and saturation, or the communication of an essential blackness in its accumulated features.⁷ In two poems we experience Lee's use of the black vernacular, "the dozens," or signifying, and visual/verbal tricks to signify difference (all lower case letters except for emphasis, abbreviated spellings, reminiscent of e. e. cummings), and a lesson or prescription on a more revolutionary behavior. "Wake Up" is built on the deconstruction of familiar cultural images: "were/don eagle & gorgeous George/sisters," he asks, referring to two flamboyant and well-known professional wrestlers of the day. The poet accuses black people of following and wasting their money on celebrities in the same way that they followed "Him/that whi/te man with/that/cross on his back."⁸ This very neat conflation of religion and entertainment, and the use of an acidic humor to critique the worship behaviors of black people – their readiness to be separated from their money – is a consistent stylistic feature of Lee's work. His audiences would be attentive to the message yet disarmed by his skillful deployment of a bantering, joking, "in-house" voice that signified both love and displeasure. In "Re-Act," the poet separates the prefix "re" from the suffix "act" to emphasize the need for repetition and to intensify the need for the action: "re-act to yr/brothers & sisters: love/re-act to whi-te actions: with real acts of blk/action./BAM BAM BAM."⁹ The poem offers a series of examples of appropriate re-actions and inappropriate ones. Some are humorous, some humorous with serious implications ("BAM BAM BAM"), the sound of gunshots, and/or the initials of the Black Arts Movement "bammer" against the stuffy limitations of the white poetry establishment's expectations.

"Re-Act" is a dynamic poem that instigates and anticipates action as a consequence of its utterance. Jerry Ward in "Illocutionary Dimensions of Poetry: Lee's 'A Poem To Complement Other Poems'" interrogates the European notion that literary works are a "parasitic" or non-contractual language game, and that the poet (unlike the teacher or the minister) is not to be held accountable for the content of the poetic statement. Ward argues successfully to contrast the "illocution" or performance of a black poem as poetry that functions on a "condition of good faith that the author's 'fiction' be commensurate with 'fact.'" In other words, the Black Arts poet must tell the truth and be responsible for any actions that his/her speech act inspires. Ward notes the necessity of recognizing that, at times, certain "linguistic features hav[e] greater significance for black speakers" and their black auditors, thereby increasing the importance of the black poetic performance.¹⁰

Ward's analysis is well supported by Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1973), which provides a thorough examination of the features of the Black Aesthetic practiced by the Black Arts poets. The internal systems are specific to black cultural idiom and art forms, specifically black speech, black music, and black energy. Henderson is very specific in his clarification of what "performance" means for the black poet. Citing Black Arts theorist and poet Larry Neal, Henderson suggests that the goal of the black poet is the "destruction of the text," meaning a use of the text as a reference for the poet's reading but not a dictate.¹¹ Such an understanding of the written poem as a "score," open to improvisation similar to a jazz performance, or to the melismatic elaborations of a gospel singer, clarifies the power waiting to be unleashed in the poet's skillful rendering of the poem. *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969), Lee's third book, demonstrates his full powers in the use of the aesthetic. The title poem, "Don't Cry, Scream (for John Coltrane/from a black poet/in a basement apt. crying dry tears of 'you ain't gone.')." is lauded by Henderson as a "literally thrilling" rendition of the principles of the Black Aesthetic.¹² The poem is four pages long and physically demanding in performance as Lee brings together the improvisational qualities of jazz – the quintessential black artistic invention – features of black vernacular, sound effects, and forced audience memory. In short, it achieves saturation, defined as "the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience."¹³ Other notable poems in *Don't Cry, Scream* are "But He Was Cool, or, he even stopped for green lights" and "A Poem To Complement Other Poems," which extend Lee's use of "the dozens," a verbal game of insult employed to hold up a mirror to the unflattering and damaging behaviors of black people and inspire positive

change. In “A Poem To Complement Other Poems,” Lee’s intense wordplay, repetitions, jokes, history lessons (“colored is something written on southern out-houses. change”), and linguistic flaying and redefinition (“change. A negro: something pigs eat”) meets all of the requirements, according to Jerry Ward, of the poem as “speech act,” a poem achieved off of the page in the poet’s performance and the expectation of a reaction.¹⁴

When Lee assumed his Kiswahili name Haki R. Madhubuti in 1974, his reputation as an author and publisher was well established. He had achieved his poetic voice while remaining consistent with the demands of the black aesthetic and the philosophies of the BAM. However, Madhubuti’s evolving poetic examination of the lives of women would test the limits of the BAM’s rhetorical stances regarding black women. In “Statistics,”¹⁵ the poet offers a sketch of a marriage that lasts for two days because the woman discovers she is not pregnant. “Blackwoman”¹⁶ is his second reference to a woman. The collapsing of “black” and “woman” into a single word designation was deliberately employed in Black Arts poetry to prescriptively answer the question of “what comes first.” Cheryl Clarke notes that this configuration offered “no space for women’s multiple identities” in the Black Arts Movement philosophy.¹⁷ Fifteen years later, Madhubuti published *Earthquakes and Sunrise Missions* (1984); the poem “Woman Black” introduces this collection. The title seems to respond to the feminist critique, yet this series of poems that summons the figures of women does not unleash their voices. The gesture calls attention to the minimal reference to women in his massive output apart from several celebratory references to Gwendolyn Brooks.

Madhubuti comes closest to grappling with the difficult issues of women’s lives in his memoir *Yellow Black* (2005). He relates how, as a boy and a young man, he watched his mother, Maxine Lee, be destroyed by the effects of poverty, and how the routine exploitation and disfranchisement of women provided the context for his own search for a community that actively expressed a respect for family and self. His early exposure to the ravages of economic inequality and his witness of gender inequalities endured by his mother determined the colors of his critical and artistic palette. Perhaps a difficult poetic dialogue with the critical and creative writings of the women poets could have brought the poet closer to the women behind the writing. In time Madhubuti, given his coherent pursuit of the generative community, would have agreed with his early mentor, Larry Neal, that what the Black Arts Movement needed was not more militancy but more discipline in shaping schools and practices that reflected the highest values of the people.

The seminal collection *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), edited by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, presented a detailed articulation of the movement's priorities and plan as argued in critical essays and demonstrated in poetry, fiction, and drama; it also revealed the masculine imagination of the project. Of the seventy-seven writers included, five are women whose work takes no issue with the men. Nikki Giovanni is notably absent from the collection, as are June Meyer (later known as June Jordan) and Audre Lorde, who were writing and publishing in the 1960s. Jordan's anthology *Soulscript* (1970) served as a counterpoint, since it included young, unknown poets as well as many of Jordan's contemporaries, especially those excluded from *Black Fire* such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Giovanni, and Lorde. *Soulscript* also broadened its scope to include literary elders and predecessors Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and more. Completing the circle, Gwendolyn Brooks, with characteristic generosity, published *Jump Bad* (1971) to highlight the work of her writing workshop students.

Gwendolyn Brooks would not have been considered for inclusion in *Black Fire*, despite or perhaps because of her established (and establishment) career success. Yet her work offered qualities that Madhubuti seeks in his later portraits of women, qualities which Michael G. Cooke named in his timely and interesting study *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (1986). Cooke brings balance to the discussion of African American art as a sociopolitical manifestation by articulating the more indelible and portable qualities to be found in the writings of African Americans. He asserts that out of the "secret matrix of signifying and blues" emerge four qualities: "1) self-veiling, 2) solitude, 3) kinship, and 4) intimacy."¹⁸ Intimacy is described as that quality that reveals a condition in which "the Afro-American protagonist ... is depicted as realistically enjoying a sound and clear orientation toward the self and the world." He notes that poet Alice Walker called for artists to seek a "wider recognition of the universe," suggesting that she has achieved this quality in her own work.¹⁹ Walker is least known for her poetry, yet we can gather something of Cooke's admiration for her ability to signify the qualities of intimacy in a simple expression of shared pain. In the poem "Be Nobody's Darling," which first appeared in her volume *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* in 1973, she resolves this advice thus: "Be an outcast. / Qualified to live / Among your dead."²⁰ Cooke's theory of intimacy is useful in considering Madhubuti's successes as well as his limitations; it also supports new readings of Gwendolyn Brooks's work, which is too often evaluated in the context of her pre- and post-Black Arts Movement poetics.

Qualities that Cooke posits as strengths were at times considered a weakness in a black poem. In her debut collection *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Gwendolyn Brooks established the space and subject of all of her subsequent writing and also initiated the qualities that have challenged critical description. Numerous critics and reviewers have noted Brooks's choice of subject and the specificity of her geography, which is not just "urban," but "Bronzeville," the black South Side of Chicago. Some knowledge of the history of black Chicago, a stopping place on the map for blacks migrating from the South to the urban North expecting to improve their lot, is essential to an informed reading of her work. Maria Mootry notes Brooks's "clever juxtaposition of 'white' areas, such as the downtown Blackstone Theatre and the University of Chicago Midway, symboliz[ing] the urban geography of class and racial segregation."²¹ In "kitchenette building," Brooks introduces urban housing as an active feature in the lives of the inhabitants. The practice of partitioning older buildings to maximize profits from poor migrant workers is an important detail about the lives of the people who lived there and their possibilities for hope. Brooks hints at the dynamics of poverty in the opening line of "kitchenette": "We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan."²² The dilemma of the persona in "the mother," who muses on her act, is painfully real – "Abortions will not let you forget./ You remember the children you got that you did not get"²³ – the fate of having to balance economics against love and possibility. Brooks's portraits capture the variety of persons and personalities among the inhabitants of black Chicago, from anguished voices of soldiers in "Gay Chaps at the Bar" to blues singer Mame in "Queen of the Blues." Her characters cast their shadows in real neighborhoods.

Her uses of form, too, follow her interest in character. Her use of the ballad, a song form, often suggests a blues sensibility, a simple sad song, as in the tale of "The Ballad of Pearl Mae Lee" or "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie." The sonnet is also a "small song" and favored by Brooks, but it is a "high art" form that in the 1940s and 1950s would have called to mind the work of Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, Shakespeare, a form derived by and for the educated classes. Claude McKay had made surprising use of the sonnet in his poem of resistance, "If We Must Die." Brooks brought the sonnet to Bronzeville. Her invention of her own form, the "sonnet-ballad," blends the qualities of each form in a rather deliberate effort to resolve the "class" differences implicit in these traditions.

"The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," a long "mock-epic" poem, anchors *A Street in Bronzeville*. "Satin-Legs" narrates a day in the life of a womanizer. The poem opens with what has been described as Brooks's linguistic difficulty: "Inamoratas, with an approbation,/ Bestowed his title. Blessed his

inclination.”²⁴ The fluid rhythms of these lines open the poem with an elegant sense of music, and also let us know that Satin-Legs is not an outcast in his world. He has been named and embraced by the women in his life; he fits in. Later we will encounter a number of music references that further contextualize Satin-Legs’s existence. We learn that he will not hear European operas on the streets where he lives, but “The Lonesome Blues, the Long-Lost Blues, I want A/ Big Fat Mama. Down these sore avenues.”²⁵ The poem is not narrated by the character, but by an intimate “omniscient,” fully apprised of the details of the life of the character, his location in the community, his style, his disappointments, his personal brand of heroism, which is to construct love and beauty within the specific contexts of his life. Brooks is clearly commenting on T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and the modernist theme of alienation and fragmentation. She does so not by submitting to that worldview but by allowing its present danger, yet revealing the ways that a black individual arises, daily, from his damages and “sheds, with his pajamas, shabby days./ And his desertedness, his intricate fear.”²⁶

In *Singers of Daybreak* (1974), Houston A. Baker describes Brooks as being caught between two worlds, manifesting the duality of double-consciousness perceived by W. E. B. Du Bois. Nevertheless, he proceeds to acknowledge that her work resolves upon revealed truth. Baker seems to be reaching for a new critical apparatus, one that will allow Brooks’s work to deliver a vision of her characters as fully engaged with their world, often responding out of “the imaginative intellect” which lies at the core of the work.²⁷ Brooks, in this period, appears entirely untroubled by what Baker and others have viewed as her double-consciousness. Her portraits offer neither pity nor protest, allowing for a complex understanding of these individual yet conjoined realities.

Annie Allen (1949), Brooks’s second collection, which brought her the Pulitzer Prize, continues the portraiture of the first collection, but devotes more attention to an ambitious narrative organization which augments the individual poems. Bronzeville is a more troubled space in 1945. A tribute to Ed Bland, killed in the Second World War, stands at the opening of *Annie Allen*, and is set off from the remainder of the collection suggestive of a certain quality, an underlying tension, in the poems to follow. Read from this entry point – a man lost to a war adventure fighting for what he could not enjoy at home – the poems in *Annie Allen* offer what Mary Helen Washington finds in Brooks’s novel *Maud Martha*, “a novel about bitterness, rage, self hatred, and ... suppressed anger” thrumming beneath the surfaces of the narrative.²⁸

The book is divided into three sections that follow the stages in a woman’s life: childhood, marriage, and motherhood. “The Anniad” returns to the

“mock epic” form, this time showing the life of a young girl. The rhyme royal suggests a certain preciousness and forces an opaqueness of language for which the poem has been criticized, and which Brooks would later describe as “labored” and “very interested in the mysteries and magic of technique.”²⁹ However, Brooks’s form is playfully suggestive in its handling of the poem’s subject. The rhyme royal, first used by Chaucer, is a seven-line form in iambic meter. Brooks maintains the seven-line structure, but experiments with a shorter line and a reversed meter (from iamb to trochee). The effect is a “falling meter,” each foot beginning with a strong stress and falling to a weaker one. The poem tells the story of a naive girl who approaches love like a fairy tale, and has her love dashed when the lover is sent to war and returns as a casualty. They both lose love and innocence. In “The Womanhood,” which follows, comes Brooks’s celebrated sonnet sequence, “The Children of the Poor.” The theme of social neglect establishes a perfect tension within the formality of the sonnet, which McKay had achieved earlier. Brooks’s use of the sonnet seems to recall the origins of the sonnet as a small, neat argument.³⁰ The voice of the mother in this sequence delivers a series of unerring, prosecutorial queries on behalf of the children of the race.

Annie Allen displays not only the writer’s mastery but the sheer joy, playfulness, and well-constructed design of Brooks’s imagination and cultural questioning. The poems satisfy as individual works; in ensemble they allow us to consider the fact of multiple female personalities – that the meanings of gender are not fixed, but multiple, and shift as women are acted upon by life, loss, maturity, death. That Brooks worked, consciously, to please her editor’s call for a book “more universal” than *A Street in Bronzeville*³¹ allows an additional view of the artist balancing the demands of her editor with her own artistic goals.

“Art,” Stephen Henderson observed, “does not exist in a vacuum and reflects – and helps to shape – the lives of those who produce it.”³² Also, artists inevitably respond to the world around them. By 1967, Brooks had published her novel *Maud Martha* (1953), and another collection of poems, *The Bean Eaters* (1960). In 1968 she published *In the Mecca*, a tragic-epic poem concerning the murder of a child. Brooks has credited her 1967 encounter with the younger poets at Fisk University for the evolution in her work, but the anguish and anger of *The Bean Eaters* indicates that the national traumas were already putting pressure on the writing. The poem sequence is not as tightly narrative as in *Annie Allen*. However, the long poem, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” blends free verse lines of varying lengths and employs the ballad as a meta-narrative

that works through and inside of the drama. The poet's decision to tell the story of Emmett Till's murder from the point of view of Carolyn Bryant, the murderer's wife, complicates reader response as the poem examines the ways that women play the roles of accomplice and victim in acts of injustice. "The Last Quatrain in the Ballad of Emmett Till," an experiment with off-rhyme, irregular line length, and understatement, examines the dual tragedies of race and illegitimate power.

Brooks attached herself to the Black Arts Movement although her poetry never quite submitted to it. Yet the condescension of some younger poets and critics toward the experience and artistry of Brooks, Dudley Randall, Naomi Long Madgett, Robert Hayden, and other accomplished writers reveals the power of a linear rhetoric in times of national trauma. Nikki Giovanni would simply claim her space by occasionally poking fun at the posturing of Black Power Movement adherents, as in the poem "Seduction," and by gradually moving to unapproved, increasingly eclectic subjects. By the mid-1970s, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and other black women writers had begun to dominate the national scene in poetry, fiction, and drama. In 1973 Margaret Walker organized the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival at Jackson State University, to honor the bicentennial of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), which at the time was the first known book published by a black person living in America. The purpose of this first major gathering of women poets and scholars was to consider the writings of African American women. The conference anticipated the rising immanence of black women, their creative and scholarly production, and gave new visibility to their ideas and work. Eventually the popular and critical success of women writers would ignite an open debate on the black woman artist and her responsibilities to her community and to her own voice.

June Jordan and Audre Lorde could well afford to work outside of the Black Arts context, although they were sympathetic to its aims. Jordan's earliest publication, *Who Look at Me* (1968), captures the independence of her voice. Employing a refrain throughout, she asks, "who look at me / who see,"³³ raising issues of race, intimacy, and what theorists would later refer to as the politics of the gaze. Dedicating the poem to her son, Jordan names the complexity of mixed-race birth and racial location in a post-slavery society. The poem emphasizes how one is seen; however, seeing is much of the poet's work. Jordan's subsequent work emphasizes how we look at things and what we learn by looking. Her writings, whether as a journalist or a poet, consistently draw attention to our modern geographies as they influence or dictate the limits of

our humanity. "From *The Talking Back of Miss Valentine Jones: Poem #1*" (including a second later poem of the same title, unnumbered) and "Fragments from a Parable (of the 1950s)" capture Jordan's use of poetics and her specific positioning of a "woman-voice" in both domestic and international politics.

The titling of "From *The Talking Back*"³⁴ hints at the existence of a more comprehensive text written by Miss Jones, the poem's persona. The speaker begins with the self-referential "Miss" as this black woman's insistence on titular respect. In Poem # One, Miss Jones lists a series of things that she wanted to do as a woman preparing for a lover's assignation and what she had to do instead (the laundry, the shopping, the sick child, etc.). Later, her suitor, a Black Arts poet wannabee, arrives bearing a "pome" about "Will the Real Miss Black America Standup?"³⁵ The poem uses humor to expose the limited ability of the Black Arts Movement adherents to really "see" the lives of black women in holistic and therefore revolutionary ways. Cheryl Clarke comments on Jordan's role in making it possible for black women to have a conversation about sexuality and sexual preferences. In the second poem, where Miss Valentine reappears as an advice columnist, Jordan demonstrates the confusions of silence and silencing. The inquirer writes: "I am not a lesbian but / I would like to have a real / experience with a girl who / is. What should I do?"³⁶ Citing another poem, "Metarhetoric," in which Jordan critiques the rhetoric of homophobia, Clarke notes the importance of making it clear that the subject is not "homophobia" but the possibilities of love. She may well be justified in drawing a connection between Jordan's probings on sexuality and politics, and a groundbreaking confluence of women's creative efforts. Barbara Smith's 1977 seminal essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," first published in *Conditions* 5, marks the beginnings of a broad scholarly effort to uncover the history of black lesbian and feminist writers, work that would bring women, both past and present, out of their invisibility and into a new and necessary dialogue.³⁷

However, in the second (unnumbered) poem by Miss Valentine – Jordan makes a more immediate demand that black Americans, especially black women, confront personal issues of identity and quality of life in the frame of international events such as the Vietnam war. Clarke ignores the poem's opening line: "THE WAR IS OVER," set to the side of the page like a headline. Calling our attention to the rhetoric of "othering," Jordan opens the poem with all of the pejoratives of racist hatred and national unity: "slant-eye devils/gooks/the fertile peril/yellow fellow travelers."³⁸ Miss Valentine rather unpatriotically celebrates the victory of the "runt-hard armies" who often employed children to fight the "big-nose eagles" to win their

"FREEDOM/FREEDOM/FREEDOM."³⁹ The poem is filled with wordplay, and the signifying art of insult as when Miss Valentine refers to the imperialist Western white men as "the crewcut losers of the war."⁴⁰ Should the reader wonder about Miss Valentine's sympathy for the Vietnamese people, the answer is to be found in the juxtaposed references to Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City and her notations on domestic events at home: jobless men; lovelessness; misogyny ("My man say if I don't give/him a baby/boy/he will throw me/out or beat/me to death"). Miss Valentine concludes that "The war's not hardly over" because black people do not have what the Vietnamese have, their FREEDOM FREEDOM FREEDOM ... In America, Africa, Mozambique, Angola.⁴¹ Miss Valentine knows that there are no "black issues" or "black women's issues." All issues are the issues of black people, of black women, of humanity.

In a little-studied work "Fragments from a Parable," Jordan employs a number of strategies to talk about the constructions of identity, gender, gender roles, and power relationships. The poem operates through free association, fragmentation of lines, and odd juxtaposing of familiar phrases. The governing idea of change being imposed by outside forces is introduced as a biblical event: *Paul was Saul. Saul got on the road and the road/and somebody else changed him into somebody else/on the road.*⁴² From these opening lines, the poem presents a disorderly female unconscious. The poem is full of assertions, denials, contradictions, and non sequiturs, closing itself and the book with these lines:

I have heard the rope in your throat ready to squeeze
Me into the syntax of stone
The sound of my life is a name you may not remember
I am losing the touch of the world to a word
*You must have said anything to me.*⁴³

Audre Lorde said of herself, "I am a Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior, poet, mother doing my work."⁴⁴ Her poetic voice is more introspective than Jordan's, and she usually leaves direct argument to her essays. Her poems "center upon the possibilities of the human and an emergent sense of intimacy," challenging readers of her work to look inward as a necessary condition of seeing.⁴⁵ Her language is surreal, haunting, often calling forth the landscape of the dream. This personal voice employs indirection, suggestion, extended metaphor, and image; her landscapes are mythic and actual; her history is personal and public; her relationship to pain is direct, unmediated by excuses; her poems name cruelty and often advocate for children. She moves between the confessional and the metaphysical vision.

Her autobiographical poems reflect a life of searching for artistic and personal freedom, making little distinction between the two. In the extraordinary poem "Coal," Lorde unfolds something like a philosophy or self-portrait:

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open...⁴⁶

Coal is the governing metaphor, even though the word is never spoken. The poem opens with the "I" enjambed and alone on the line. In line two, the emphasis falls upon "Is" creating "I/Is," a declarative that hints at black vernacular speech as it simultaneously creates an emphatic statement of being. The poem depends upon the reader's knowledge that coal is the precursor to diamond; within the image, black is revealed as the precursor to white. Coal, before being submitted to pressure, is soft; the diamond is the hardest known substance. The poem makes a leap of logic: "There are many kinds of open." It is this openness that the poem explores, building on a series of extrapolations and free associations: diamonds, words, open, love. Openness is what the poem explores, vulnerabilities, words spoken and unspoken. In the final line, openness becomes love and "black" is a word for open and for light. Love, then, must be understood in its relationship to hate and darkness.

Lorde's career of poetry writing and activism reflects her sense of herself as a woman living in a broader world that extends beyond the United States mainland, as a poet who does not "do" poetry, but is always functioning through her poetry. "Being a poet," she told Charles Rowell of *Callaloo*, "is not merely a question of producing poems. Being a poet means that I have a certain way of looking at the world."⁴⁷ Her poems reveal her way of studying the world through the word "I."

In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde focuses on the difficulty women have studying the world, examining the connections between love, power, oppression, and sexuality in order to expose the methodology of sexual oppression: "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane."⁴⁸ Her theory of the erotic as power rejects the idea that a woman's sexuality is a weakness. The essay intends to throw light on unexamined cultural tenets regarding women's sexuality and proposes that women have been seduced into or forced to negate their erotic power. Lorde refers to this essay and a second, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," as

“progressions in feeling.”⁴⁹ Both essays connect Lorde’s approach to her art through her body and through her unromanticized understanding of love.

Lorde also draws a connection between the body, the word, and the world. Poetry, the freedom to think and speak, is therefore a fundamental resource, not an embellishment. If these things are true, how could an organization or movement claim the authority to tell a woman what or how to write? Lorde’s poetry and essays call upon women to challenge cultural assumptions rather than conform, and to reclaim their voices. In “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Lorde explores the reasons for our silences and observes that “what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid?”⁵⁰ The theme of silence is taken up in the poetry as well. “Litany for Survival” corresponds with her concern that silence is the greatest hindrance to liberation. The poem resolves with an encouragement toward liberation: “So it is better to speak/remembersing/we were never meant to survive.”⁵¹

In *The Black Unicorn* (1978), Lorde works through a psychic connection to Africa. In “Sequelae” and “The Women of Dan Dance with Their Swords in Their Hands To Mark the Time When They Were Warriors,” the language and imagery of dreams invoke the soul geographies and ritual knowledge that remain with us despite distances and time. In “Sequelae” the persona pursues a deeper knowledge of herself: “I am standing between/my burned hands in the ashprint of two different houses ... I figure in the dreams of people/who do not even know me.” The voice takes the tone of the mystic reading an invisible imprinting upon the body; the poem traces a journey taken by the dreamer. In the dream, the speaker enters into old spaces seeking their secrets, knowledge that will free her into a life of her own choosing, because “I have died too many deaths/that were not mine.”⁵²

In “Chain,” Lorde takes her subject from a news headline about abused children. The poem’s inspiration is literal, but the poem proceeds by narrating the consequences that the betrayal of children will have on society: “look at the skeletal children/advancing against us,”⁵³ she says. Language and imagery are beauties that contrast sharply with the horrors that she uncovers in our public and private existences. *Between Our Selves* (1976), a chapbook of seven poems published two years before *Black Unicorn*, “reflect[s] the process of Lorde’s spiritual transformation in Africa.”⁵⁴ The first poem, “Power,” begins with a declaration that seems to rebuke the rhetoric of Black Arts poets, and all empty posturing, as dangerous: “The difference between poetry and rhetoric/is being ready to kill/yourself/instead of your children.”⁵⁵

Lorde observed that, “Over and over again in the 60s I was asked to justify my existence and my work because I was a woman, because I was a Lesbian,

because I was not a separatist ... I had to hold onto all of the parts of me that served me."⁵⁶ She knew that liberation must not be denied through the partitioning of identities. Lorde's work is important to artists for its affirmation of the value of not fitting in, or as Michael Harper would say, knowing the danger of believing in a closed-ended myth.

Michael S. Harper's natural curiosities, rather than any political affinity, constituted his resistance to the rigidities of the Black Arts ideals of expression. He rejected the idea of a separatist blackness, blackness as limitation, or race as a fixed location, static identity, or voice. Nor could he subscribe to the dismissal of the vast body of African American literature and scholarship generated by a host of elder writers and scholars, whose intellectual stance demanded awareness, engagement with the universe of ideas, and selectivity. His work honors, references, and connects with Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, and Ralph Ellison in particular. Harper rejected dichotomous thinking in pursuit of a more unified idea captured in the concept of kinship as an essential aspect of our humanness.

Fascinated, as others have been, by Janheinz Jahn's study of African philosophy, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, Harper was influenced by the fourth category of African ontology, "Kuntu." Kuntu, a tenet Jahn translates as "modality, quality, style, rhythm, beauty, etc.,"⁵⁷ is the fundamental African principle which assumes the essential coherence or compatibility among all things or among all disciplines.⁵⁸ This notion of a philosophy of coherence and "play" connected with his love for jazz which had begun in early childhood.

The beginnings of this experiment are evident in the defiant opening poem "Brother John" in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, Harper's first book. It opens with emphatic declarative repetitions, "Black man:/I'm a black man:/... I am - ." Harper's posture here connects him to the Black Arts Movement impulse, its assertion of the primacy of black music and its tonalities. The persona seems to shift and play the changes moving from "Black man," to reference Charlie "Bird" Parker: "Bird, buttermilk bird - /smack, booze and bitches."⁵⁹ The poem continues in movements, shifting into and through an African mythic trope of flying; the horn work of these black musicians is a kind of flight, not necessarily literal. The poem shifts again, revealing Miles Davis; shifts, there's John Coltrane at the poem's apex. The poem returns, transformed, to the song's melody, "Brother John." "Brother John," and the title poem in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* are often cited for their exploration of Harper's jazz interest and other aspects of black vernacular and lore. The reference to "John" goes directly to Coltrane, but it can also evoke the central figure in African American folklore, a

transitional figure from the Br'er Rabbit of black American enslavement to the hyper-masculine trickster figure that morphs from trickster John to Zora Neale Hurston's High John de Conquer to Stackolee. Or one might think of W. E. B. Du Bois's "Of the Coming of John," a figure more blues inflected than the trickster variant. In this first work of Harper's artistic youth, we can see a shared philosophy on jazz music's importance to poetry but a rejection of the militant nationalism of the Black Arts Movement in favor of a rich investigation of kinships, and a conscious movement through time and space in search of a pliable artistic method.

Harper's pursuit of a poetics of connection provides useful ways of reading other major contemporary artists such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, Elizabeth Alexander, and many of the younger poets who show his influence. Kinship, Harper's central trope, "has become a major option or even program of black literature in recent years,"⁶⁰ proving the attractiveness of the possibility of connection without obliterating difference in an era when race and ethnicity have come to be interrogated, as reputable scientists dispute race as a reliable human descriptor, and as ease of global travel alters our sense of time, location, and connection. His poetics also unleash the generative potential to be found in a wealth of ancient lore and earlier literary works. Critic Robert Stepto explores this potential in his essay "After Modernism, after Hibernation: Michael Harper, Robert Hayden and Jay Wright." Working from Paul De Mann's observation of the "problematical possibility of all literature's existing in the present,"⁶¹ Stepto unpacks Harper's multipart poem *History as Apple Tree* (1972), as a postmodern epilogue to Ellison's modernist novel, *Invisible Man*. The invisible man's enigmatic closure, delivered at the end of his hibernation ("Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"), is taken as a call into the future, "a prefigurement of epilogues to its epilogue," inviting multiple responses on the African American condition.⁶² Harper's *History* is one of many potential responses – Robert Hayden and Jay Wright offer others – permitting a dynamic reading of the call and response between Ellison and Harper and a fresh consideration of the implications of future action.

Stepto explicates the use of images, repetitions, and variations throughout *Apple Tree* as Harper explores loss, kinship, inheritance, and the potential for self-transformation, which link the poem's speaker with the Native Americans of Rhode Island in the 1600s and Roger Williams, the "maverick founder of Rhode Island ... and a captain of militia in King Philip's War."⁶³ In a poem-series ("The Negatives," "Photographs," "The Utility Room," and others) the poet employs a number of strategies, puns, and image reversals to unveil

hidden historical connections. Punning on the word “negative,” as both film and condition, Harper applies the doubling to the photo acid solution: it is the “developer,” but so is the woman who processes the film. The darkroom operates multiply, as a literal space, a world, a womb. The “negative” of the title is the literal film image in reverse and the negative circumstances against which the man and woman in the darkroom must struggle. The poem moves through a series of images and locations, from darkroom to cemetery, private to public, solitude to connection. Stepto asks whether this poem, with its themes of pain and loss, is a depiction of the continuing “hibernation” of the hero (invisible man’s underground preparation for action), or a post-hibernation work revealing the imminent action following hibernation, which is Ellison’s promise. He determines that the poem is active.

Moving to a series of elegies by Robert Hayden, Stepto comments on the poet’s lyrical calling of the names of lost kin, a literal repopulating of Hayden’s devastated landscape. Jay Wright’s mystical ritual voice seems, to Stepto, to answer the Invisible Man’s call for a return to hibernation, a necessary process of rebirth.⁶⁴ The interpretive space that Stepto argues for in this reading of the texts within a shared temporal space emphasizes the kind of freedom that the literature enjoys, and that we enjoy, if we accept the fluidity of our concepts of modernity and, to use a different metaphor, stand in the crossroads of our literatures where vital exchanges can be negotiated.

Harper’s poems are dense and complex constructions demanding attention to surfaces and sub-texts. *Nightmare Begins Responsibility* (1975) echoes the title of a Delmore Schwartz short story, “In Dreams Begin Responsibility” (1937), reversing dream to nightmare (the negative), which contains the potential for shared pain and self-knowledge. The Schwartz story entertains the desire to change the past, a recurring theme in our relationships to history. The greater possibility, however, is in altering one’s relationship to the past, thereby altering both past and future. Cooke refers to the trajectory of Harper’s narrative as redemptive;⁶⁵ but redemption evokes something emotionally pat, and too narrow to project the power of what Harper is proposing for the literature, and for ourselves in our ability to act positively in ways that transform, that literally alter ourselves and our environments. Harper calls for a committed act that must fully acknowledge the pain of the past; the present work is to do art as a kind of conjure.

In *Debridement* (1973), Harper turns his attention to war and the casualties of war. The sequence of poems is based on the true story of Specialist Fifth Class Dwight H. Johnson, a Vietnam veteran who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery. After being returned home to Detroit, he was

ultimately shot dead in an attempted robbery.⁶⁶ The poem sequence works to explore how myths, stories of our selves, operate. The poem presents a narrative of the making of a narrative – the construction of an official senate document which manufactures an official and celebratory lie characterizing the soldier, Johnson, as hero. Johnson cannot recall the incident in question. Yet the state's intent is to veil, obscure the truth of the man, with what Harper terms "a closed myth." Harper examines what he calls "open-ended" and "closed-ended" myths,⁶⁷ and the danger presented by our willingness to believe in closed myths, which employ stereotypes and other strategies to create psychic traps. The "hero" is a closed myth. The official myth of the hero makes Johnson invisible (rather than visible as a man) and therefore places him beyond the care of those who might have assisted him with his psychic dislocations. An open myth is one where the ending is undetermined, not fixed. In *Appletree*, Harper resolves the action by opening an initially "closed-ended" myth, allowing the poem's actor to challenge the myth and construct his own. In *Debridement*, we glimpse the need for the state to construct myth in order to preserve social order.⁶⁸ The senate record need not deal with the man; it knows better how to deal with the death of "An American War Hero."

Stepito's critical examination encourages us to read Harper backwards and forwards, that is to say, with a memory and anticipation of his literary kin. One thinks back to Gwendolyn Brooks's 1945 sonnet sequence "Negro Hero," and beyond to Yusef Komunyakaa's Vietnam poems in *Dien Cai Dau* (1988). Read together, they are a palimpsest, a series of color transparencies, each layer informing and complicating the other with permeating histories.

Larry Neal, who co-edited *Black Fire* with LeRoi Jones in 1968, would later write "more than one essay suggesting that the legacy of that aesthetic – its defensive chauvinism and mystical reliance on 'race' – was detrimental to the progress of both black literature and criticism."⁶⁹ Neal concluded later in his career that "Since life is change ... art must be change ... There are, consequently, no steadfast critical values."⁷⁰ The contemporary scene in African American poetry is marked by an acceptance of the impossibility of the past, what Lucille Clifton has called "two-headedness," a simultaneity of glances, a constant engagement with and connection to stories, cultural remnants, the present voices of literary ancestors. Its experimentation usefully attends to the stories of artists' struggles for individuality and voice typified by Countee Cullen or James Baldwin and the BAM debates. The artists are more often confronting dichotomies of race and reality rather than succumbing to them. This liberated and liberating stance does not account for market forces that can be powerful trend setters; it speaks to the most lasting work to be

produced, a collection of voices that bring into focus the broader efforts of the African American poet from Phillis Wheatley to Du Bois to today's poetries. Michael Harper deeply informs this moment; Yusef Komunyakaa captures it in the power and exploratory confidence evident in his work. In *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries* (2000), Komunyakaa comments on jazz, not as a music product, but as a history and a philosophy: "Our music allowed us to stay connected to our heritage, yet propels us into the future. Being in motion – improvisation, becoming – this is the mode of our creativity."⁷¹ It is this mode, the striving toward becoming, that may be instructive in understanding the forces that move in contemporary writing.

Yusef Komunyakaa's poetry and career capture this idea of becoming, of improvisation, freedom to "make vivid excursions into my creative universe."⁷² Angela Salas provides a useful treatment of these issues, and of the range and significance of his career, declaring that "Komunyakaa deftly uses and deflates conventional Western and African American conceptions about 'skin,' 'space,' and 'soul.'" ⁷³ However, only part of this work can be accomplished by the poet; poetry, like music, must capture the reader and then "teach" her how to read.

Yusef Komunyakaa's signature poems are sonic; they are sensual, driven forward by a powerful and sure narrative voice; they can summon ancient drums, invoke the possibility of magic, of things not-quite-known, a quality which one might wish to attribute to some magical intangible that he takes from his home state of Louisiana. In "Ode to a Drum," Komunyakaa invokes an ancient belief in spirit – here, the spirit of the gazelle is summoned forth and transformed through the drum beat: "Now/I have beaten a song back into you,/rise and walk away like a panther."⁷⁴ Komunyakaa's is a voice of conjure absent false mysticism – one believes in the poem itself, in the poem's speaker. The voice can be one of subtle danger, of humor, and sometimes of a deceptive simplicity drawing Africa to the crossroad, as in this portrait of Charlie "Bird" Parker: "Did he think Edgard/Varese & Stefan Wolpe could help/heal the track marks crisscrossing/veins that worked their way back/up the Nile."⁷⁵ The blues motif often surfaces in his tonality and use of rhythm, but more often it operates through a blues philosophy where "the accent is on the positive, even when the negative pervades."⁷⁶

Komunyakaa's poems generally exhibit a craft that is not predetermined by poetic form. He speaks to this: "For me the poem is an action that attempts to defy structure as container or mold. However, it does embrace control (an artist has to know and respect the instrument) in language."⁷⁷ *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* (2001) includes work from seven of his ten volumes of

poetry, work from three chapbooks, and sections for “early uncollected” and “new poems.” The volume reveals the connections working through the poet’s imagination and his subtle uses of form. In the early uncollected poems, he dedicates poems to Mississippi John Hurt, whom he characterizes as a “knife-edge of seeing,” and to Langston Hughes.⁷⁸ The poems in *Copacetic* (1984) continue the explorations in jazz and blues that inform Komunyakaa’s entire corpus. Included are “Elegy for Thelonious” and “Copacetic Mingus,” and poems that sing in a blues voice, such as “Letter to Bob Kaufman” and “Woman, I Got the Blues.” “False Leads” captures the folk wit of Langston Hughes’s “man farthest down” – Hughes’s way of describing the vast population of working-class people admirable for their “mother wit” and “common sense.” “False Leads” is a portrait voice-poem that explores the vernacular relationship to power. The dissembling speaker is a fast talker who will assist Slick Sam the Freight Train Hopper in his escape from the law. The speaker balances threat and warning as he addresses the lawman: “Mister, your life could be worth/less than a hole in a plug nickel.”⁷⁹ Komunyakaa is a master of voice – his ear unerring. His poems dance around the relationship between pain, self-discovery, and power.

Dien Cai Dau (1988), pronounced “dinky-dow” – a Vietnamese expression that means “crazy” – powerfully evokes the experiences of soldiers serving in the Vietnam war. “Camouflaging the Chimera” opens the book, presenting alternating unrhymed tercets and quatrains that march down the page. The poem builds on the tiny details of setting as a soldier in camouflage tries to make himself invisible in nature while anticipating the unnatural task of organized killing. It closes with the apt detail: “a world revolved/under each man’s eyelid.”⁸⁰ “You and I are Disappearing” records, in a series of similes, the burning of a Vietnamese girl. The poem is relentless as it ticks off its ruthless comparisons from “the fat tip of a banker’s cigar” to Moses’s burning bush.⁸¹ Without special mention, the history of lynching in America is easily conjured in this fire that will cost more than a girl’s life; the soldier is burning as well.

“You And I Are Disappearing,” “Communiqué,” and “Saigon Bar Girls, 1975” display Komunyakaa’s control of detail, rhythm, pacing, and narrative restraint. The closing poem, “Facing It,” takes the Vietnam war memorial in Washington, DC as its central image or surface upon which play images of memory and illusion, the past touching the present. Other poems shimmer beneath the surface of the writing, such as “Boy Wearing a Dead Man’s Clothes,” if the reader has read poems in *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986). These poems do not shy away from the moral or political implications of their subject.

Komunyakaa's more recent works, *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000), comprised of 132 poems in four-stanza quatrains, and *Taboo*, made of forty-six poems in unrhymed tercets (2004), are playful engagements with the gods of various cultures and eras. Voice is less engulfing in these works with their heavier allusive burden. Komunyakaa has said of his more recent uses of the controlled form that he was "attracted to the shape of each poem ... a falling shape – a surge and descending."⁸² *Warhorses* (2008) is dedicated to the subject of war and employs a range of poem shapes and forms, as if each section inhabited a different landscape. There is something of the power of the voice in many of these poems, as with "Heavy Metal Soliloquy": "I was inside a womb,/a carmine world, caught in a limbo,/my finger on the trigger, getting ready to die,/Getting ready to be born."⁸³

Komunyakaa wears his Pulitzer Prize and various accolades like a good pair of shoes. He enjoys multiple collaborations with other artists and scholars, many of whom were presented and discussed in a 2005 *Callaloo* Special Issue devoted to Komunyakaa. His lyric play, *Slip Knot*, first staged as a workshop-in-progress at Northwestern University in April 2003, is based on the true story of Arthur, a Massachusetts slave who was hanged on a false charge of rape. The history was researched by Timothy Breen;⁸⁴ the composer was poet/musician T.J. Anderson.⁸⁵ His urban opera *The Reincarnated Beethoven* was inspired by a *New York Times* article by Amy Waldman⁸⁶ about a black teenager, Dewitt White, who said of himself that he was "Beethoven reincarnated."⁸⁷ Perhaps Komunyakaa took it as a sign, a summons out of history, that White shared the first name of Gwendolyn Brooks's "plain black boy" in her poem "Dewitt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery."⁸⁸ As Aldon Nielsen reminds us, bringing music and performance together with poetry invigorates the long tradition of jazz/poetry beginning with Langston Hughes's recording of poetry to jazz, and extended in Amiri Baraka's recording of *Black and Beautiful*, *Soul and Madness*.⁸⁹

Rita Dove also creates outside of the poetry genre, including the novel, the play, ballroom dancing, and classical music. As a poet, she is often characterized as working outside of the African American tradition, or as having escaped it. She admits that she "did not have to rage against a white culture ... the [Black Arts] Movement had done that work. And that's no small favor."⁹⁰ Her subjects are not overtly political by choice. Yet her work may contribute to a more elastic perception of the legitimate interests of a black poet. Dove came to true prominence with the publication of *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), her third book, which earned her a Pulitzer Prize in poetry. She subsequently served as US Poet Laureate. *Thomas and Beulah* is a poetic chronicle loosely based on the

experiences of her grandparents, who were a part of the mass black migration from South to North. The poem-sequence offers a double narrative suggesting the ways that women's and men's lives can often parallel but fail to cross or inform one another. The collection highlights Dove's strengths as a poet, her economy and beauty of language. Her first two book-length collections, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980) and *Museum* (1983), have received more attention since *Beulah* garnered a Pulitzer Prize. The early works clearly outlined the broad landscape of Dove's imagination, which defies what many have come to expect as the territories of the African American writer. "The wider world was ready for nuance," Dove observes.⁹¹ In this comment, she seems to echo Gwendolyn Brooks who, speaking of the future of black writing, mused that in time "something will have been decided, and the poets will then have time to play more with their art."⁹²

Dove's first collection, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, signaled the range of the poet's reference. Employing her Fulbright experience in Germany, Dove brought the culture and landscape of that space to her images, as in "The Bird Frau."⁹³ The book is divided into five sections. Notably, part three calls forth the voices of figures from American history whose presences are neglected in history books. David Walker, a black abolitionist, and Benjamin Banneker, a black "renaissance man," make their appearances. The juxtaposition of international images, tales, histories, and racially charged moments in American history creates an unusual combination of narratives in a single volume. Individual poems in the collection are stunning as art and as political statements. Two examples are "Beauty and the Beast" with its fairytale theme and feminist undercurrents,⁹⁴ and "Adolescence II," which captures the surreal, often fearful qualities of adolescence.⁹⁵

Museum opens with a dedication "for nobody/who made us possible," a statement that invites an interpretation of the collective pronoun "us." The poem "The Fish in the Stone" tells us that the fish is "weary/of analysis, the small/predictable truths."⁹⁶ Certainly the comment of the poem finds resonance in the poet's resistance to expectation in her poetic style, her subjects, her dispassionate handling of her subjects, and her lack of interest in poetry that makes direct political statement. The work invites nuanced reading and perhaps a willingness to find the connections between subjects that occupy such literally distant spaces. The poem ends with an image, "the fern's/voluptuous Braille,"⁹⁷ the kind of lyrical image that Dove seems never to exhaust, and here suggests the uniqueness of every story. The collection samples Asian, African, American, and European stories and landscapes.

Thomas and Beulah offers what the earlier works do not – a coherent narrative that makes an emotional connection with a single told story. Dove's remarkable economy of language and startling precision in rendering image are especially evident in the simple but well-shaped character portraits. The opening poem, "The Event," written in unrhymed tercets, reveals the first love relationship, which is not the love of Thomas and Beulah but the love of two friends, Lem and Thomas, a quiet affirmation of the deep affinity that is possible between men, but not often acknowledged. It is also the first great heartbreak – Lem leaps from the side of a paddle ship on a dare and is killed.⁹⁸ This unrequited loss will literally haunt the happiness of Thomas, while remaining unknown to Beulah. The poem's sequential vignettes are presented as movements, reflecting Dove's interest in music, owing to her years of training as a concert cellist. In "Courtship, Diligence," a scene in Beulah and Thomas's courtship from Beulah's point of view, the language captures a simple gesture of the suitor: "A yellow scarf runs through his fingers/as if it were melting."⁹⁹ The story of Thomas and Beulah builds on a series of ordinary experiences that capture the nature of love as it struggles into being, then struggles to sustain. In the poem "The Charm," Thomas has a dream. In it, his childhood friend Lem seems to speak: "I ain't dead./I just gave you my life."¹⁰⁰ Dove connects here with something ancient, the idea that the dead are always with us, and that perhaps it is death that feeds the living.

In *Mother Love* (1995), Dove returns to the sonnet sequence to explore the mother/daughter relationship, draping the modern narrative over the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone. An introductory comment provides the important details of the myth and connects her use of the sonnet to the mythic theme. Throughout *Mother Love*, the sonnet form – and its formal promise of perfection and synchronicity – is made malleable. Dove's altered sonnet form becomes a reflection of change and loss (yet underlying stability) in a universe where things go awry. She hints at the nature of the unexpected in her opening poem, "Heroes," which employs the trope of a Perrault fairy tale – someone plucks a flower and is doomed.¹⁰¹ There is also humor: Persephone climbing down to hell tosses up her tennis shoes and "'ladies' foundations' in winch-and-pulley configurations."¹⁰²

Dove's poetry publications also include *Grace Notes* (1989), *American Smooth* (2006), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, (1999), and a verse play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994). Her forthcoming work, *Sonata Mulattica*, attempts to discover the facts of a black violinist, George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower, who played for Beethoven.¹⁰³ Her surprise at discovering a black man in that group

spurred the research on this unknown black figure. One critic has written that “Dove’s best work occurs in quiet close-ups.”¹⁰⁴ Her work is filled with delicate interpretive portraits and details of lives that are ordinary and extraordinary. In “Claudette Colvin Goes to Work,” Dove imagines the life and thoughts of Claudette Colvin, the young woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person long before Rosa Parks’s famous refusal, but was thought unsuitable for the desired civil action. As Colvin exits the bus and walks to her menial job, she is taunted and insulted by random males on the street. When Colvin asks, “What do we have to do to make God love us?”¹⁰⁵ we know that Dove has brought to the poem her knowledge of the racial and intraracial insults in the lives of unprotected girls, the trials of being the outsider of a nation and within one’s own group – that doubled pain of invisibility.

Harryette Mullen, like Dove, defies categorical expectations. She is among the most experimental of the contemporary poets, resembling no other poet working today. Her poems may take us further toward an unburdening of the African American poet of persistent assumptions about what is or is not “black” poetry, and perhaps foster the breakdown of racially segregated reading. Among her influences, Mullen has included everything from “Gertrude Stein to the Black Arts Movement, from Sappho to Bessie Smith, from Language poetry to rap.”¹⁰⁶ Her materials have included the language of childhood rhymes, advertising jingles, comic books, and cliché. She has described her work as synthetic, inorganic, artificial, playful, “a linguistic archeology of the metaphorical origins of words, a resurrection of dead metaphors.”¹⁰⁷

Mullen’s earlier more conventional work is collected in *Blues Baby: Early Poems* (2002). These narrative and autobiographical poems employ a free verse line and irregular rhyme in strophes. Yet, the work predicts the poet’s interest in culture and cultural practices as they manifest in the language. In “Eyes in the Back of Her Head,” Mullen builds a series of “mom-isms,” the verbal claims made by black mothers designed to control the behavior of children through linguistic representations of their power. The poem’s title includes one: Yes, I have eyes in the back of my head. Another: “Hell, I know you: I birthed you/Saw you before you saw yourself.”¹⁰⁸ She has recorded the linguistic creativity of this verbal figure – women with memorable mouths.

Her third book, *Trimnings* (1991), is a direct poetic comment, or “talking back,” to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Stein, influenced by cubism, treated words as colors and melody rather than as narrative units; her poems were paintings in words. Mullen brings to Stein her interest in the contemporary

language of the television and radio commercial, of global material culture, a kind of archeological interest in words, word patterns, word sounds. Her unique approach can be assessed in this frequently cited one-line poem from *Trimings*: “Shades, cool dark lasses. Ghost of a smile.”¹⁰⁹ The word poem insists that we read down as well as across, like a puzzle. Reading down from “shades,” we can word associate to a familiar pejorative for black people, to a hip expression for sunglasses, to a synonym for ghosts, to the coolness of shade beneath a tree. If we read across and down, “cool dark lasses” puns on “dark lasses” i.e., dark girls, and dark glasses, cool dark girls in glasses, etc. “Ghosts of a smile” bends back to the first reference to shades. The ghosts of a smile could potentially yield a sexual history on race and gender. The poems appear in blocks like prose poems, but often display a lyrical quality. Mullen explains that in her poetry she observes grammar and punctuation only to indicate rhythm. Her dismissal of the rules of sentence organization frees her work to be allusive, suggestive, and open to multiple readings and interpretations, none being correct or incorrect.

Mullen’s study at University of California at Santa Cruz with Roger Abrahams, an expert in African and African American folklore, put her in touch with black cultural expressions with which she was not familiar. Abrahams knew about the Toast, a masculine, often vulgar, black verbal tradition. Mullen knew about the jump rope rhymes and verbal games of childhood. Her prose poem “She Swam On from Sea to Shine” evokes and even quotes from the Shine tale which tells the story of how Shine survived the sinking of the Titanic; but Mullen creates a new kind of narrative that is not a part of that male tradition – a story made up of the collected fragments of a black girl’s trials and triumphs. The narrative is full of jokes, allusions and linguistic play:

when the ship went down, she wouldn’t sink, had to swim, she brought her suit. She’d float like a jellyfish, sting like a man of war, or seaweed ain’t salty. Water was her element. She swam on.¹¹⁰

*S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), which can be read as “Supermarket” or “Sperm Kit,” takes the form of referential prose poems. Mullen captures the words of consumer relationships represented by the supermarket. The poems, which appear in untitled blocks, lead us up and down the aisles of our highly purchasable lives filled with marketing claims: “Just add water. That home-spun incantation activates potent powders.”¹¹¹

Muse & Drudge (1995) embeds cultural comment in her language experiment. The title refers to black women who have been both muse, inspiration,

and drudge, the workhorse of society – “the black woman as beast of burden or as a postmodern diva.”¹¹² It also references a blues tradition and history. *Muse* presents very clean four-line stanzas stacking familiar phrases, images, and allusions that evoke the presences of black women: “pot said kettle’s mama/must’ve burnt them turnip greens” is suggestive of verbal and food histories. Mullen describes *Muse & Drudge* as “very much a book of echoes ... a recycling of fragments of language.”¹¹³ Lorenzo Thomas observes that “Everything is open to creative questioning here, even English syntax. Allusions to popular culture, African American folklore, and poststructuralist philosophy are handled with the fluent rapidity of jazz improvisation.”¹¹⁴

Regarding poetry’s audience, and commenting on student’s concerns with “race-ing” texts, Mullen has noticed that “People have a very specific notion of what black poetry is ... the question is how blackness is defined and who defines it.”¹¹⁵ She rejects the dichotomy often created between “black” and “white” texts – the notion that black texts are oral and speech-based, which leads to a narrow interpretation of what it means for a text to be “oral.”¹¹⁶ In fact, an entire area of black creativity has been neglected. Aldon Lynn Nielsen places Mullen’s work within the trajectory of a rich tradition in black experimental writing, which includes William Melvin Kelly (*Dunsfords Travels Everywhere*), Norman H. Pritchard, Russell Atkins, De Leon Harrison, and others. He sees Mullen’s work as an important avenue to the study and acknowledgment of this important tradition of innovation.¹¹⁷ Paradoxically, this poet whose work demands so much of her reader identifies her future audience as an illiterate child born of an illiterate mother, the product of our increasingly inhumane social and economic policies which guarantee an increasingly illiterate populace, including those who are educated but incapable of critical examination of their lives or their world.¹¹⁸ Her poems seem merely playful, but they raise political, social, and cultural issues that must be entertained by the reader willing to investigate beneath the surfaces of words, or sing them.

Mullen has spoken of the difficulty of “know[ing] what we believe about ourselves. So often we are performing, and we are paid for performing – we are surviving, assimilating, blending in. When are we ourselves? Beyond being a credit or discredit to our race, who are we?”¹¹⁹ The question is reminiscent of one of the more literal lines from “She Swam on”: “They paid her to be smart, or dumb, it didn’t matter. If they paid her, she could eat.”¹²⁰ Mullen questions the very possibility of the true individual, one who can distinguish between internal and external voices and balance the demands of each. The poet, whether lauded or ignored, is confronted with the same choice.

The defining or redefining of our cultural modes is always a dialogue. This discussion began with W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes, both of whom were concerned with the good of the larger community. Perhaps the difference was in Du Bois's greater confidence in the perfectibility of an external culture which would then define the individual path versus Hughes's confidence in the "low beating of the tom toms," in the dialectic of the beautifully and the ultimate need for us to find our freedoms within ourselves. The Black Arts Movement poets, perhaps unintentionally, assumed the role of Du Bois's Talented Tenth, the social prophets who would lead the people by example. At the opening edge of the twenty-first century, the dialogue on race and "blackness" has returned with fresh confusion and energy. In 2008 a black man campaigned for President of the United States, only to learn that he was perhaps not "really black" because his direct ancestors were merely colonized in Africa and not transported to their slavery in the Americas. He responded by claiming all of his ancestors, black and white, African and American. Even Hughes did not fully enjoy the freedom to claim every part of the "self," to fully engage the negotiation of all of his identities and kin.

The process of coming to oneself is important work. In *Native Guard* (2006), Natasha Trethewey takes permission to write her own story of biracial birth against the Civil War-infused Southern landscape. In "Theories of Space and Time," she observes: "the photograph – who you were – / will be waiting when you return."¹²¹ We are permitted to know that the "I" in the poems is very close to the poet herself; her epigrammatic references to Charles Wright, a consummate poet, and Nina Simone, a consummate singer, are also the race-gender notations of her life. Before the publication of *Native Guard*, Trethewey had examined the confrontation of historical definitions of race, identity, location, personal redefinition and power in *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002). The volume imagines the story of "Ophelia," a prostitute photographed by E.J. Bellocq in the early 1900s. Bellocq routinely visited the segregated brothels to photograph the various women. Trethewey began research on Bellocq's female subjects after she discovered a cache of his photographs. The "girls" are mulatta, or quadroon, the period term for blacks whose blackness is more definitional than observable – black because they are known to be black, and because the women possess their own histories. With each book, Trethewey has come closer to her subject – herself, and her private negotiations with a public past.

The revived discourse on race and identity has generated new terminology. Emerging poets have begun to be described in terms of their "cosmopolitanism" or "hybridity" (an unfortunate terminology), and, rather unsuccessfully,

as “post-black,” rather than “black,” descriptions intended to comment on the range and reach of their subjects and references. In “The Poet in the World, the World in the Poet,” Malin Pereira looks at the work of Elizabeth Alexander and Cyrus Cassells as poets who perceive no limits to where they may turn their poetic interest or their eye. This curiosity would not seem remarkable but for the comparison to the vivid era of the Black Arts Movement and its codifying of a black aesthetic, and only if Africa and the diaspora are excluded from the Cosmos. In her first book, *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), Alexander introduced the title poem for which she will always be studied and known. The poem moves through multiple voices, from Georges Cuvier, a French naturalist, to the “voice” of Saartjie Baartman, a black South African woman who was lured to Europe and put on display between 1810 and 1815 in London’s Piccadilly Circus and other sites in Paris.¹²² Following her death, Cuvier dissected Baartman’s body; her “genitals, brain, and skeleton were preserved in a jar exhibited for years ... at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris” until 1974 when her remains were returned to South Africa.¹²³ The imagined voice of Baartman, the “Venus Hottentot” (whose utterances are not preserved in any known historical documents), dominates the poem, giving her agency and undoing the historical silence imposed upon her mutilated body. In a third collection, *The Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), Alexander blends the personal and the public with an adroitness of ear as she fully inhabits her own sexual and mothering body, then visits those of her varied subjects, from Toni Morrison to Muhammad Ali. Alexander’s work touches upon the themes of kinship, recovery of history, and redefinition of self that move through the poems of contemporary poets.

In 2001 poets Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera edited *Bum Rush the Page*, a collection of poems that, in a way, narrates the arc of this story of black poetry, its definitions and redefinitions. Medina and Rivera state in their introduction that the selected poems exist “in a paradox,” a celebration of what is spoken but also a valorization of what is written down – capturing what is fleeting and what is archival. The sophistication of their approach reflects the grand discovery of the porous relationship between “the streets”, that immediate, passionate utterance, and the archive, the preservation of materials for future reference and illumination. The poets of hip hop, spoken word, “the street” have not been studied in this writing (requiring their own segment of the arc); their existence is predicted and predicated in the poetry and resistances of the Black Arts Movement, and the insistencies and inclusivities of the women’s movement, and welcomed in the voice force of Sonia Sanchez, who greets them in her Foreword to the volume. Included in this

paradoxical publication are poets from the Harlem Renaissance to the hip hop generation, poets who capture the spirit of the blues voice in these lines by Lucille Clifton: "Come celebrate with me/that every day something/has tried to kill me/and has failed."¹²⁴ This bridging of kinship is our evolved and evolving opportunity to create and escape all the categories, redefining our selves in poetry's search for truth, our only steadfast critical value.

The publication of *Bum Rush* revives the spirit of June Jordan's *Soulscript*, wherein she worked to bring all generations of poetic voice together, understanding, as Harryette Mullen's works suggest, that everything may not be poetry, but poetry can be found in every thing, every voice, every word. It also reminds us that black poetry has been about more than the art of writing; it has spoken to the art of community. If the poetry experiments of contemporary black poets are more vital and varied than what we see across the spectrum of fiction writing, it can be credited to the limited commercial influence in matters of poetry (beyond prizes and university appointments) and the strength of the poetry community. Charles Rowell has deployed *Callaloo* magazine for thirty years as a beautiful sounding board for new and established writers. In 1994 and 2004, the Furious Flower conferences, conceived by Joanne Y. Gabbin in honor of Gwendolyn Brooks, and from whose poetry the conferences took their title, were held at James Madison University. In 1996 Cave Canem was founded by poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, now a powerful engine and resource for African American poets. Komunyakaa, Mullen, Harper, Lucille Clifton, Elizabeth Alexander, Nikky Finney, Sonia Sanchez, and many other poets have served as workshop leaders and supporters of Cave Canem, whose goal is to foster community and access for young African American writers who are often studying poetry in disparate places, in predominantly white writing workshops, or otherwise working without supports. The Carolina African American Writers' Collective in Durham organized by Lenard D. Moore; the Eugene B. Redmond Writers' Club in East St. Louis initiated in 1986 by poet and editor of *Drumvoices* Eugene B. Redmond; the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York, founded in 1973 by Miguel Algarin; and the Hurston/Wright Foundation founded in 1990 by Marita Golden and Clyde McElvene are notable among the organizations whose mission is to support the development of diverse poets and their craft.

In 1999 Rita Dove judged the Cave Canem poetry prize, selecting Natasha Trethewey, the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 2007. In 1990 Haki Madhubuti initiated the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Center at Chicago State University; in 2000 he announced the initiation of their MFA program, the first at an institution primarily serving African American students – a paradox

perhaps, as Haki Madhubuti works to inscribe the lessons of a lifetime onto an institutional cornerstone. In 1993 Maya Angelou was the inaugural poet for Bill Clinton. On January 20, 2008, Elizabeth Alexander read an original poem as the fourth inaugural poet selected by the first African American President of the United States.

In 2002 Maryemma Graham initiated an international symposium at the University of Kansas celebrating the centennial of Langston Hughes, commemorating his legacy as a writer and his commitment to the “man (and woman) farthest down.” The papers were read but the stories were of his generosity, his encouragement of younger writers. What is Black poetry? Who will (re)define it? Who will free us, but ourselves? When poets commune, they decide what they believe about themselves. Something has indeed been decided. Mr. Hughes and Ms. Brooks would be encouraged.

Notes

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115. Frost, "An Interview with Harryette Mullen," p. 417.
116. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, p. 35.
117. *Ibid.*
118. Mullen, "Imagining the Unimagined Reader," p. 199.
119. Frost, "An Interview with Harryette Mullen," p. 416.
120. Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, p. 65.
121. Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 1.
122. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 6.
123. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
124. Quoted in Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera (eds.), *Bum Rush the Page: a def poetry jam*, Foreword by Sonia Sanchez (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), p. xxii.

Cultural resistance and avant-garde aesthetics: African American poetry from 1970 to the present

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Sparked by the furious flames of the Black Power Movement during the late 1960s, much of the black poetry written since 1970 has reflected the intensity with which black poets have responded to the call of fusing aesthetics with political theory and social responsibility. This decidedly oppositional notion of art and politics was poignantly expressed in John Oliver Killens's statement regarding the role of black writers in his 1968 essay "The Writer and Black Liberation." According to Killens, black writing will only achieve "social relevance" insofar as it "is part and parcel of the worldwide revolution of people of color against colonialism and white racism."¹ Many younger black poets and critics assumed a similar stance. One of the most insightful of these writers was Carolyn Rodgers (1945–2010). Although she is seldom discussed in contemporary cultural criticism, Rodgers's criticism not only preceded Stephen Henderson's classic study *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972); it also anticipated the vernacular-based literary theories of such acclaimed scholars as Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. As Jerry W. Ward, Jr. has pointed out, Rodgers developed a mode of vernacular speech act theory.² Rodgers theorized ten categories of poems, including signifying, a term that critics now associate with Gates's scholarship.

Poet and critic Larry Neal published what became the manifesto of the Black Arts Movement, insisting that black writers design their works specifically for black audiences. He proclaims, "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the spiritual sister of the Black Power concept."³ For Neal and many other young black poets, their reexamination of the role of the artist-intellectual under oppressive conditions provided the impetus to create a new aesthetic. Black Arts writers theorized their work as part of

a larger, collective effort to achieve self-determination, including the right to determine the terms under which blacks are represented in American culture. Neal writes, "Yeah, you can take the other dude's instruments and play like your Uncle Rufus's hog callings. But there's another possibility also. You could make your own instrument. And if you can sing through that instrument, you can impose your voice on the world in a heretofore-unthought-of manner."⁴ Neal goes on to propose one of the most controversial ideas in the history of American literature – the destruction of the printed page as the sole model for poetic forms and artifacts: "We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to Malcolm's speeches than from most of Western poetics ... Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like [James Brown]?"⁵ In Neal's inversion of the bourgeois model of literature itself, he clearly implies that there exists a "black" aesthetic that has been shaped by the historical experiences of African American culture and that black poets should write with this black aesthetic in mind. In other words, since blacks have developed their own tastes and sensibilities, it is necessary to create forms of literature that accommodate their stylistic proclivities and thereby become popular in predominantly black neighborhoods.

The development of a people's poetry based upon black speech and music as allusive and formal materials was theorized most thoroughly by the critic Stephen Henderson, whose *Understanding the New Black Poetry* is probably the most important study of black poetry ever written. According to Henderson, the new poetry was characterized and contextualized by prosodies implicit within specific black musical and verbal modes of expression. Verbal forms include: (1) virtuoso naming and enumerating; (2) jazzy rhythmic effects; (3) virtuoso free-rhyming; (4) hyperbolic imagery; (5) metaphysical imagery; (6) understatement; (7) compressed and cryptic imagery; (8) worrying the line.⁶ Henderson's foresight is notable here. Although he was writing in the 1970s, the features that he identifies, with the exception of "understatement [s]," might just as easily describe a poetics of flow in hip hop.

In his section "Black Music as Poetic Reference,"⁷ Henderson cites various musical references that helped shape black poetic form during the era:

1. The casual, generalized reference
2. The careful allusion to song titles
3. The quotations from song titles
4. The adaption of song forms
5. The use of tonal memory as poetic structure
6. The use of precise musical notation in the text
7. The use of an assumed emotional response incorporated

8. The musician as subject/poem/history/myth
9. The use of language from the jazz life
10. The poem as "score" or "chart"

Many of these approaches were common in the poetry long before the 1960s. Indeed, the passage reads as a guide for critical discussions of Langston Hughes's jazz aesthetic. Unlike previous poets, though, many young poets of the late 1960s forged dynamic, improvisational artistic methods. The poets drew heavily from such paralinguistic forms as sermons, songs, and street-corner raps. The specific nuances of their performances were often shaped and/or dictated by interactions between poets and audience members. According to Henderson, such poetry could best be theorized as a musical score, an idea that runs counter to the received, fetishized notion wherein literature is narrowly defined as printed material. "A poem may differ from performance to performance," he writes, "just as jazz performances of 'My Favorite Things' would."⁸ Henderson's allusion to jazz is particularly notable, since the "jazz poem" was "the basic conceptual model" of Black Arts poetry. As the critic D. H. Melhem observes, "The result [was] something new, embedded in social utility."⁹ Thus, Black Arts poetry emerged as an avant-garde sector of the nation's literature, but it is seldom acknowledged as such in critical writing.

It is important to bear in mind that not all poets agreed on the terms that constituted blackness. After the movement waned in the mid-1970s, many poets who emerged during the 1980s increasingly rejected the idea that black writers should assume oppositional positions vis-à-vis mainstream American society. Thus, black poetry cannot be characterized in monolithic terms. For many poets, any assumption of social responsibility as a literary artist led to an engagement and revision of black vernacular expressive forms, such as jazz, blues, sermons, and impromptu and formulaic rhymes that are characteristic features of hip hop. Other writers believed that content and point of view were more important than style. Most poets, however, combined elements of the vernacular with conventional literary approaches in their works, while positing a critical perspective on racial issues. Etheridge Knight's poetry exemplifies such versatility. A veteran of the Korean war who was convicted of armed robbery in 1960, Knight (1931–91) honed his writing skills during his incarceration, and became one of the most accomplished literary stylists of his generation. His first volume of poetry, *Poems from Prison* (1968), was well received by critics, and his book *Belly Song* (1973) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. A performer of impromptu rhymes typically performed during gambling sessions, and a culturally informed observer of "street" mores in pool halls and neighborhood bars, Knight exemplified many of the fundamental

precepts of the Black Arts Movement, namely that African Americans have created aesthetic ideas that are culturally specific.

Coming of age in the mid-twentieth century, Knight was introduced to poetry through the toast tradition. The toast is a black vernacular poetic form that prefigured rapping in hip hop culture, but the aesthetic foundations of the genre extend back to slavery. Typically comprised of rhymed couplets, toasts are poetic narratives that often feature rough and rowdy characters who inspire fear in blacks as well as whites. As an art form, the toast requires an exacting memory, the ability to act, and an adept understanding of the musical and onomatopoeic potential of the English language. That Knight never abandoned the practice of memorizing his poems demonstrates the significance of vernacularism in Knight's approach to writing.

We can observe the manner in which Knight revises the toast in "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane" and "Dark Prophecy: I Sing of Shine," which were originally published in his book *Poems from Prison*. As Michael Collins has observed, Knight analyzes the political implications surrounding violence in prisons and repressive environments generally in "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane."¹⁰ Set in prison and narrated in black "street" lexicon and cadence, the poem focuses upon a fearless character named Hard Rock who becomes a symbol of resistance for black inmates because of his refusal to genuflect and his consequent conflicts with white prisoners and guards. The name Hard Rock, which exemplifies the hyperbolic imagery that Henderson identifies, recalls the black badman Dolemite whose name evokes, in turn, the name of a rock comprised of magnesium carbonate – dolomite. The latter poem refers, as the subtitle suggests, to the protagonist Shine in the toast "The Titanic." Whereas Dolemite signifies bravado as a response to racist repression, the name Shine reveals a more cunning reaction to social marginalization: Shine is a parodic inversion of the term "shine" which was a derogatory term that whites used to denigrate blacks in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, Knight's performance in the poem is decidedly literary. The toast provides the basis for literary experimentation, which culminates in a revision that contains echoes of its model. Knight strips much of the formulaic elements of the toast (e.g., extended rhymes and sub-narratives), creating a poetic narrative whose diction and rhythm are specifically crafted for literary discourse: "I sing to thee of Shine/the stoker who was hip enough to flee the fucking ship."¹¹

Knight's artistic ideas reflect his cultural politics. In "On Universalism," Knight responds to the age-old criticism that black writers should write less about African American themes and more about so-called universal themes,

which implies that African American culture and universality are mutually exclusive. Although writers like Yusef Komunyakaa, who matured during the 1980s, would later theorize black culture as a specific set of historical experiences that reflect universal emotions and situations, the terms “Western,” “white,” and “literature” were still synonymous in American culture in the late 1960s, and black poets found it necessary to attack the hegemony of traditional Western aesthetics and proclaim the right to create art on their own terms. Knight writes, “I see no single thread/That binds me one to all.”¹² Parodying hegemonic poetic diction, Knight begins each line with a capital letter and each stanza with a metaphoric line that forms the basis of subsequent versification. Having been castigated for being different from mainstream Americans, black artists such as Knight celebrated their cultural distinctiveness.

At the same time, it is important to understand that Knight saw nothing contradictory about utilizing Western literary approaches to depict the nuances of black life. In his most famous poem “The Idea of Ancestry,” Knight employs long, prosaic, Whitmanesque lines to create a poetic narrative of family history. Composed during an eight-year imprisonment for robbery, the poem exudes cultural history in microcosm. It not only narrates the rupture of the poet’s family; it suggests that a more figurative, but nonetheless fundamental, imprisonment of blacks exists in American society:

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black
faces: my father, mother, grandmothers, (1 dead), grand-
fathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts,
... I am all of them, they are all of me;
they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.¹³

The fragmentation of Knight’s family summons the nightmare of slavery, the dissolution of black families, and the consequent alienation between parents and children. The bitter irony of “The Idea of Ancestry” is that the poet develops his artistic sensibility and vision behind prison walls, which renders him powerless to ameliorate the tensions in his own family, much less the larger society.

Knight’s strength is his capacity to capture such complexities in poetic form. His poetry is a testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit. It illustrates and celebrates the process of self-transformation under incredibly repressive conditions. For instance, in “He Sees Through Stone,” Knight pays tribute to prisoners who have become philosophers who extol the virtues of self-examination and critical thinking. That the black sage “sees through stone” while sitting “against the western wall” suggests a critical vision of political economy in the larger

Western world that extends beyond the confines of the penal institution.¹⁴ Having learned “the secret rites,” he now imparts them to younger men, instructing the “black cats [who] circle him”¹⁵ in the prison yard, their “ears peeling his words.”¹⁶ The irony, of course, is that roughly half a century after Knight’s incarceration, his sagacious words now peel our ears. And unlike his older counterpart, Knight’s wisdom is available to a wider audience because his perspectives are codified as poetic artifacts.

If Knight gives testimony to the capacity of the new black politics and poetry to transform individuals and groups, then Amiri Baraka showcases the aesthetic possibilities of the new poetry. Perhaps no other writer so fully exemplifies the fiery activism that fueled the artistic experimentation of this period. Baraka’s public espousal of black nationalism, which signaled his rejection of traditional Western values and poetics as effective paradigms for African American art, reflected his view that working-class black communities should be the primary audiences and reference points for black writers. Having achieved wide acclaim during the Beat period, Baraka, like many young artists, became increasingly influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X.

Consequently, nationalism became a recurrent theme in his work during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and he developed a new artistic method to express his nationalist ideology. The phrase that most effectively describes this linkage between the poets’ efforts to achieve black unity and their novel concepts of poetry is the Black Aesthetic. Since the young poets believed that art should reflect black people’s cultural mores and living experiences, while also promoting political change, the artists aligned themselves with the Black Power Movement and referred to their revolutionary writings as the Black Arts Movement.

Whereas Neal’s essay “The Black Arts Movement” served as the manifesto of the movement, Baraka’s poem “Black Art” expressed an artistic credo for poets, musicians, dancers, and visual artists. A vehement response to the reactionary politics implicit in the ostensibly apolitical idea of “art for art’s sake,” “Black Art” expresses the terms and spirit in which the new black poetry challenged normative ideas of literature and genteel decorum:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
Teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts.¹⁷

Baraka’s use of declamatory rhetoric and profanity typifies much of the poetry from this period. Recorded in 1965 with such avant-garde jazz musicians as

Albert Ayler and Don Cherry, "Black Art," which was originally published in Baraka's *Black Magic* (1969), anticipates collaborations between poets and musicians that have become customary today.

As the movement waned amidst a reemergence of reactionary ideas and policies in the mid-1970s, many people began to reexamine their political ideas. Baraka was no exception. Having proclaimed, "The Negro artist who is not a nationalist at this late date [1969] is a white artist,"¹⁸ Baraka turned to Karl Marx's theory of class politics as a more effective framework in which to theorize resistance in internationalist terms. This move proved to be highly controversial because Marxist writers have tended to frame the contradictions between workers and the corporate elite in such a manner that deemphasizes discrimination that accrues from racism. However, Baraka, who is best described as a Third World Marxist, has been able to fuse Marxist theory with specific elements of black culture. The most important poem from this period is probably "Dope," which was published in *Poetry for the Advanced* (1979) and represents Afro-Christianity as a medium of obfuscation.

The title reflects Marx's famous statement that "religion is the opium of the people."¹⁹ And though "Dope" was written after the movement had declined, it is one of the finest examples of a "scored" poem ever written. "Dope" reveals the full maturation of Baraka's approach to a sound-based poetics. Whereas "Black Art" reflects modernist techniques of literary style on the printed page, "Dope" is barely intelligible in print. In fact, the recorded version is the definitive artifact. At the outset of the poem, Baraka parodies the sounds of a junkie who is strung out on heroin. However, these sounds, which are represented on the page as "uuuuuuuuuu," are not visually intelligible. It is only when the poet's voice is *heard* that meaning is produced because sound signifies the referent of Baraka's parody. "Dope" mocks the manner in which the church has helped affluent members of American society to maintain the power it wields over working-class blacks by diverting their attention from their daily lives, especially experiences specifically related to race, and encouraging them to concentrate on salvation and the hereafter. According to this interpretation of scriptures, people will have little need of concerning themselves with correcting the policies and statutes that have been used to exploit them on earth because they will enjoy eternal bliss. Meanwhile, Baraka suggests, the preachers, politicians, and corporate executives will lead even more privileged lives because of their expanded wealth and power.

In more recent years, Baraka has experimented with various poetic forms, including cantos and a "low coup," an ironic, vernacular revision of the traditional Japanese haiku. He remains as controversial as ever. His poem

"Somebody Blew Up America" sparked intense controversy because it posed sharp questions that implied that neo-conservatives, especially the Bush administration, were involved in the destruction of the twin towers on September 11, 2001 because the sense of outrage that the public felt would make it easier for them to galvanize support for a war against Iraq.

Like Baraka, poet Sonia Sanchez has continued to attract attention for her controversial writings. A staunch ally of Baraka over the years, Sanchez has garnered wide acclaim since the 1960s as a penetrating social critic and stunning performer of her own poetry. Beginning with the publication of *Homecoming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), and *It's a New Day* (1971), Sanchez has published numerous books of poems, including *homegirls & handgrenades* (1984), which won an American Book Award in 1984. She was teaching at San Francisco State University along with fellow poet Sarah Webster Fabio when black students made the first demands for Black Studies, and she has remained an important model for young writers, particularly women. Her book *It's a New Day* reflects the optimism spawned by overt forms of political activism during the era. It also reflects Sanchez's involvement with Islam. Since many young blacks believed that Christianity tended to promote docility and subservience, they turned to the Nation of Islam and the example of Malcolm X as alternatives. Hence, in her poem "It's a New Day" she engages in "virtuoso naming and enumerating" of such iconic political figures as Minister Farrakhan, Elijah Muhammad, and Julius Nyerere.²⁰ Muhammed founded the Nation of Islam, Farrakhan succeeded Malcolm X as a charismatic leader in the Nation, and Nyerere served as President of Tanzania and previously Tanganyika from 1964 to 1985.

Throughout her career as a writer/activist, Sanchez has utilized her poetic talents as a salve against the psychic trauma that blacks have experienced in America. She creates alternative images of blackness, illustrating possibilities of change, while personifying dynamism and agency with her impassioned politics and individual achievements. In the title poem "It's a New Day," Sanchez uses incremental repetition as a basis for rhythmic and melodic experimentation. Sanchez's emphasis on the verb "be" ("we gon be") points up blacks' utter refusal to defer freedom and equality. Employing the refrain "we gon be" as an effective rhythmic basis, the poet attacks ersatz blackness by presenting iconic figures that can serve as viable alternatives to the normative examples of blackness. Then, using the title of her book *We a BaddDDD People* as a point of departure, Sanchez blends the riff-chorus with the titular phrase: "We gon be some baddddd people."²¹ Here the poet functions as a secular priest, redirecting and recreating images to instill hope,

confidence, and self-esteem in the minds and souls of her primary audience. Her use of the zero-copula reflects the centrality of black street vernacular in the Black Aesthetic. She employs this artistic method to convey ideas directly to predominantly black working-class audiences. Her chief concern here is the assertion of viewpoints that stand in direct opposition to bourgeois ideology. Since the very term "black" had been associated with mediocrity, if not outright buffoonery, Sanchez's bold assertion demonstrates her belief that black poets must assume leading roles in revising deep-seated myths of inferiority that blacks had internalized.

Although Black Arts poets were criticized for emphasizing content over craft, Sanchez has always experimented with poetic forms. In addition to her early pastiches of e. e. cummings, Sanchez has incorporated the traditional Japanese haiku into her poetic corpus. She has also experimented with the prose poem, transforming it into rhythmic expression. Pyrotechnics are central to Sanchez's notion of "craft." Perhaps the most salient example can be found on her album *Full Moon of Sonia* (2004). In a live performance of the material recorded on the album, Sanchez was accompanied by male and female dance troupes, a band including drums, bass, and saxophone, two pianos, two women singers, and one male vocalist. Sanchez modulated her voice, varying degrees of intonation and pitch. In turn, the band interpreted Sanchez's poetic narratives, elaborating on her thematic and stylistic ideas, while the dancers lent shape to the music, sketching the images and motifs with their bodies. Consequently, even though many people were already familiar with some of these poems, the feeling in the audience was electric because the additional media accentuated the emotional effect of Sanchez's performance. As in the black church tradition, the audience bore witness to the historical and emotional truths to which Sanchez testified. There were cries, shouts, and other onomatopoeic expressions of affirmation.

Sanchez's *Full Moon of Sonia* reflects the potentiality of a sound-based approach to poetry. Many of the poems had been published in *homegirls & handgrenades* and *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987). At once immediately accessible and denotatively inscrutable, the musical embellishment reveals a concept of poetry comparable to song. As in Baraka's poem "Dope," words are merely lyrics. Interpretation necessitates listening, witnessing. The performance, not the printed artifact, becomes the definitive text. In other words, the printed poem can be read as a basic formula upon which the poet-singer improvises and re-creates according to the specific nuances and dynamics of the situation at hand. The poet and musicians create mosaics of sound that sometimes defy denotative interpretation, but, like songs, stimulate sheer pleasure and joy

nonetheless. Thus, Sanchez's aural texts become definitive artifacts of her artistic efforts.

Whereas Sanchez has been the subject of countless scholarly articles and remains among the most popular black poets in America, Jayne Cortez is relatively little known outside of literary circles. Yet she may be the most accomplished poet of her generation. Since the publication of *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (1969), Cortez has remained a productive poet who has continued to develop artistically. Subsequent publications include: *Festivals and Funerals* (1971), *Scarifications* (1973), *Mouth on Paper* (1977), *Firespitters* (1982), *Coagulations* (1985), *Poetic Magnetic* (1991), and *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* (1996). She has also recorded several albums, including *Celebrations and Solitudes* (1975), *Unsubmissive Blues* (1980), *There It Is* (1982), *Maintain Control* (1986), *Poetry and Music* (1994), *Taking the Blues Back Home* (1996), and *Find Your Own Voice* (2006). Like most Black Arts poets, she has based her concepts of literary style on African American vernacular culture, particularly music and linguistic expressions. However, her second book *Festivals and Funerals* (1971) marked the beginning of her experiments with Surrealism, which proved to be as significant in Cortez's development as it was uncommon in her era. The major theorists of Black Aesthetic poetry tended to advocate that black writers avoid conventional Western forms not only because they presumed that such forms were incompatible with stylistic proclivities in black communities, but also because they presumed that such forms expressed Eurocentric worldviews and values and, therefore, affirmed the logic of white privilege itself. But Cortez, who has followed the examples of such surrealists as French poet André Breton and Martinican poet and activist Aimé Césaire, has found that Surrealism could assist her in her efforts to depict the complexities of black life. Since surrealists believe that reality is often shrouded in the interior of human emotions and feelings, Cortez has discovered that Surrealism can help her to illustrate deeper realities reflected in blues, jazz, and other black expressive forms. Her poetry probes and depicts subcutaneous sensations that are largely hidden from mainstream America. And since blues and jazz are also surrealist forms, she has blended conventional concepts of Surrealism with artistic methods and cultural concepts that are specifically related to black musical forms, creating, in effect, a bluesurrealism.

Cortez's focus upon the human interior allows her to address issues that lie at the very heart of enslavement, colonization, and postmodern marginalization. The process of transforming free people into slaves necessarily involved the destruction of material and philosophical reminders of African heritage.

However, as Cortez suggests in her book title *Scarifications*, blacks retained far more elements of traditional African philosophies than their masters imagined. Transmuted into black vernacular expressions and practices, these revised concepts are often reflected in predispositions regarding aesthetics and religious values. Cortez uses her bluesurreal method of creative-critical analysis to paint this interior, while simultaneously invoking and evoking black cultural history in her depictions of the present. Her work is thereby filled with jarring imagistic juxtapositions that are typical of surrealist poetry, yet the images and thematic concerns are specific to African American working-class culture. For instance, in "Carolina Kingston," her protagonist "splash[es] down from egyptian coffins/to johnnie walker red."²² Like black preachers and musicians, Cortez usually employs a key word or phrase to establish a basis for rhythmic, thematic, and melodic elaboration. For instance, in "You Know," which is subtitled "(For the people who speak the you know language)," she riffs on the phrase "you know" to posit an alternative reading of blues music and black vernacular English, which has been mischaracterized historically as a lack of intelligence. However, Cortez represents the phrase as poetic beautification, while positing blues images that are devoid of the usual stereotypes.

you know
go into the dark meat of a crocodile
and pinpoint the process
you know
into a solo a hundred times
like the first line of Aretha Franklin.²³

The key phrase initiates an antiphonal procedure known as call and response. "[Y]ou know" issues the call, the next line responds, and the following line elaborates on the implicit idea in the former. Like jazz solos, Cortez's phrases embellish preceding ones; her poems are highlighted by interlocking phrases and improvisations.

Since Cortez believes that art plays a vital role in cultural politics, she envisages formal innovation as a necessary component of creating social change. The crocodile image reflects Cortez's sharp departure away from realism, which some artists associated with the status quo. However, the most distinctive aspect of Cortez's artistic experiments is her work with musicians. Having studied music formally, Cortez has developed the unique ability to blend the pitch of her voice with the instrumental sounds of her band. Cortez uses her voice as an instrument, blurring the line between poetry and song,

creating song-poems that revise received notions of poetry itself. Thus, her poetry constitutes what Aldon Nielsen would describe as the calligraphy of black chant.²⁴

Poet Henry Dumas's career ended before he could achieve his full potential, when he was fatally shot by a policeman in New York in 1968. Dumas's death remains as mysterious as his critical invisibility. Born in Sweet Home, Arkansas, he moved to New York at age ten, but remembered his Southern experiences fondly. For Dumas, blackness included the communal spirit of Arkansas churches no less than the hip language of Harlem. Though he believed deeply, like Killens, that black writing should reflect one's socio-political commitment to working-class blacks, Dumas tended to avoid the rhetorical modes of writing that typified Black Arts poetry, opting instead to study linguistic developments in urban etymology, which, along with black folklore and musical forms, comprised the conceptual elements of his aesthetic. He experimented with prose poems, blues lyrics, and black vernacular street expressions. Dumas also found beauty in the jokes and "lies" recanted in bars, pool halls, barbershops, and beauty shops. His poem "I Laugh Talk Joke" is reminiscent of Sterling Brown's 1932 publication of "Kentucky Blues" wherein Brown captures a black male speaker's country diction and glaring contradictions while representing him sympathetically. In "I Laugh Talk Joke," Dumas captures the poetic cadences of braggadocio in the form of "trash talking." Although the speaker does not express a clear political stance, he is clearly no defender of the status quo. As the title suggests, he is no stranger to laughter. However, his smiles and laughter must not be confused with genuflection: "god raised me and the devil/praised me,"²⁵ and when crossed, he may "catch a preacher in a boat/and slit his throat."²⁶ In "Peas," Dumas lightens the mood by capturing the humor that is a staple of blues culture:

Peas in the pod
 Peas in my gut
 Peas in the belly roll
 Doing the strut.²⁷

In addition to the incomparable blues artist Jelly Roll Morton, the belly roll image evokes such classic blues songs as Bessie Smith's "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine" and "Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl." At the same time, the short poem can be read as a wry celebration of the scatological humor in blues culture.

Throughout his writings, Dumas assumed philosophical and political positions that were at odds with the ruling oligarchy of American society. We can

observe this vision in his poem "Funk" wherein the poet appropriates traditional African ritual and myth to create a narrative of his ancestral past. The poet's description of himself as a child of god refers to a lineage that descends from the Yoruban god of war, Shango – not the Christian God: "The great god Shango in the African sea/ reached down with palm oil and oozed out me."²⁸ It is worth noting that Dumas's use of the term "funk" prefigures James Brown's "Make It Funky" (1971), and bandleader George Clinton's popularization of the term "funk" in the mid-1970s. The foregoing points attest to Dumas's foresight, which ironically reflects his intense studying of traditional African philosophies. According to critic Clyde Taylor, Dumas's vision "is always on the line of the diaspora, from Africa, cross the ocean, the deep rural South and on into the Northern cities."²⁹ Thus, Dumas was preeminently concerned with preserving and extending what he envisioned as an Africanist ontology,³⁰ which afforded him the rather unique vantage point from which he observed American economic policies.

At times, Dumas examined the process by which American economic and political institutions enact policies that prioritize profits over the interests of the workers that produce them, while simultaneously conditioning the populace to associate the free enterprise system with freedom itself. In "America," for instance, Dumas illustrates this contradiction by rereading the eagle as a metaphor of conditioning and confinement. Employing the irony so central to the blues, he writes: "If an eagle be imprisoned/ on the back of a coin."³¹ There is a clever inversion here. The tossed coin – not the iconic bird – ascends into the air, flipping, fluttering, and finally falling back to the earth's surface. Dumas suggests that the capitalist superstructure produces a mythology that creates sensations and illusions of living in a genuine democracy, so that elite sectors of the society can more effectively exploit less privileged people. Thus, Dumas concludes with a haunting vision of the future: "the eagle will never fly."³²

In "Lash – American Yankee Song" and "'Tis of Thee," Dumas demonstrates his oppositional "second sight" more clearly. The latter mocks the iconic song "America, the Beautiful" by omitting the words "My Country" in his title. Where the canonical composition posits the image of pristine national existence, Dumas's poem personifies America as a ruthless patriarch who is "an overkiller"³³ with a voracious appetite for power and privilege: "You are fat with starch and lies."³⁴ The poem reflects the clarity of Dumas's political perspicacity, that is, his capacity to correlate the intensification of militarism ("Your wars are massacres") with corporate greed: "[your] language sounds like millions of coins jingling."³⁵ Similarly, in "Lash," Dumas critiques the

received version of American historiography. But whereas “’Tis of Thee” is prosaic, “Lash” is lyrical. Here, as in “Peas” and other poems, Dumas employs rhyme in the poem: “ropes your shadow to the ground/and defies your black heart to cry a sound.”³⁶ Dumas’s resort to end rhyme reflects a relatively unique viewpoint regarding the musical properties of language – a theory and practice that reflected the sensibilities encoded in the works of black vernacular poets for whom rhyme is typically considered to be a prerequisite for poetry. As writers of free verse, most poets eschewed end rhyme (Etheridge Knight was a notable exception) because of the constraints that it tends to impose on prosody. However, both Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez employed various forms of rhyme at times in their poetry. “Lash” contains nine stanzas, each beginning with a one-word line (“lash”). The incremental repetition creates an antiphonal effect, while evoking the sound and violence symbolized by the lash:

Lash
the lynched tree mocks you for me
ropes your shadow to the ground
and defies your black heart to cry a sound.³⁷

One of the most prolific and profound poets who emerged during the late 1960s was Lucille Clifton (1936–2010), whose first collection *Good Times* appeared in 1969. Given the polemical nature of most Black Arts poetry, it is ironic that Clifton’s poem “Homage to My Hips” (1980) has become a classic response to the misrepresentations of black women’s bodies because she was not typically associated with activism. Although many black writers were central figures in cultural organizations, Clifton devoted much of her energy to motherhood, which helped shape the parameters of her unique perspective. Unlike black poets who envision blacks as their primary audience, Clifton does not identify a particular audience, saying, “I don’t know who my audience is.”³⁸ Having received letters from Albanian soldiers who fought on opposing sides, she says, “That is not something that I know. And I have learned that I can’t put boundaries around it.”³⁹

Part of Clifton’s expansive appeal is that she is able to touch the very core of human emotions in her work. At times, there is a distinct sense of outrage in her poetry. Themes include slavery, violence, pain, the female body, motherhood, sisterhood, child abuse, cancer, and death – and she manages to express her views regarding a multitude of topics without intimidating readers. Situated in mundane, experiential contexts, her poetry probes the seeds of contradictory behavior in which injustice thrives in myriad forms. Clifton’s

voice tends to be private. Her characters share intimate experiences in off-hand parlance, yet their points of view can be jarring and haunting. For instance, the phrase “*overheard in hospital*” is a subtitle of “incantation,” a provocative poem about the mistreatment of cancer patients that reveals the institutionalization of horror and human degradation. The title is an ironic euphemism for impish sadism, and the poet’s ironic repetition of a joke-turned-lyric exposes violence administered under the guise of medical procedures:

take a needle
thin as a lash,
puncture the doorway
to her blood.⁴⁰

The precision of the imagery is typical of Clifton’s work. Here she illustrates the process whereby patients become mere phantoms of themselves. The intense pain itself prompts genuflection to the hospital staff. However, the poet is careful to suggest that institutionalized violence is not restricted to hospitals. As the title suggests, Clifton’s focus is directed to the connections between pleasure and power – specifically, the pleasure that certain individuals derive from imposing their will on others within institutional settings.

Clifton often lends lyricism to characters trapped in horrific situations; she paints a world of beleaguered individuals with fragile assurances – people who feel utterly powerless in specific social contexts. The poems are prosodic illustrations of the tonality and torment therein. That Clifton exposes a similar abuse of power when she turns her attention to familial experiences reflects her belief that evil is omnipresent in human life. Unlike many poets, though, Clifton is remarkably adept at representing the perspectives of characters who abuse privileges and power. In “mercy,” we hear the remembrances of a woman reflecting upon her childhood experiences as a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. However, the private nature of her thematic concern gives voice to the father-child tormentor as well – but only from the perspective of the daughter-victim. Central to this artistic method is the objective of depicting the deformity of her father’s mentality. Hence, we hear the father through the words of the daughter, who expresses conflicting emotional responses. Wondering aloud whether he should continue fondling his daughter with his fingers, or engage in coitus with her, he “mumbled ‘maybe I shouldn’t do that.’”⁴¹

Clifton’s fascination for finding poetry in the most private situations has not prevented her from directing her attention to social issues. At times, she is inspired

by international figures such as the South African activist Winnie Mandela in “winnie poem.” On other occasions, Clifton writes about such historical figures as the nineteenth-century Native American political leader Crazy Horse: “the death of crazy horse,” “crazy horse names his daughter,” “crazy horse instructs the young men but in their grief they forget,” and “the message of crazy horse.”⁴² She has also written about the attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, dedicating one poem each day for a week thereafter, expressing the unspeakable yet again, while critiquing the onset of American jingoism: “tuesday 9/11/01,” “wednesday 9/12/01,” “thursday 9/13/01,” “friday 9/14/01,” “saturday 9/15/01,” “sunday morning 9/16/01,” and “monday sundown 9/17/01.”⁴³

Finally, Clifton’s use of humor is also noteworthy, particularly in the contexts of familial situations. In “admonitions,” she demonstrates her ability to laugh not only at herself, but also at our society’s propensity for anti-intellectualism. The poet advises her children to deflect critical attention away from their family by redefining conventional notions of motherhood, admonishing her children to respond to people’s reactions to her idiosyncrasies by telling them “she is a poet/she don’t have no sense.”⁴⁴

Poet Sterling Plumpp has also had an ambivalent relationship with Black Arts theories. He was a member of the famous Organization of Black American Culture Writers’ Workshop (OBAC), led by Hoyt Fuller, editor of *Black World*. While most of his OBAC colleagues envisioned black culture in terms of urban experiences, Plumpp’s vision was much broader. The ethos he developed while growing up and working on farms in Mississippi with his grandparents – that is, the down home blues culture – shaped his perceptions of the experiences he had as a young man in Chicago. An astute observer of black musical forms and African American vernacular language, Plumpp is one of the most innovative poets in America. Among his most notable publications are *The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go*, which won the 1983 Carl Sandburg Award for Poetry, *Blues: The Story Always Untold, Blues Narratives* (1989), and *Velvet Bebob Kente Cloth* (2003). Plumpp developed as a poet during the turbulence of the 1960s, and while he recognized the beauty and insight inscribed within African American vernacular culture, he was suspicious of the terms in which Black Arts poets tended to conceptualize black art. Many of the young poets framed blackness in relation to West African values and mores, contending rightly that contemporary black cultural expressions were often transpositions of a not so distant past. However, despite the poets’ intention of counteracting the effects of generations of self-loathing caused by racist policies and images, references to this historical legacy were sometimes nebulous, leading to parochial notions of blackness based primarily on the

young poets' sketchy understanding of African cultures and their own urban experiences. Plump, on the other hand, inverted the Black Arts model, formulating an aesthetic on the cultural forms that blacks have created in the context of their experiences in the United States. For Plump, such an outlook did not indicate a lack of interest in traditional African history. Rather, it necessitated a more intimate understanding of black expressive forms as correlatives to the African past.

Plump's work can be read as a double-edged revision of the Black Aesthetic. He envisions black poetics as culturally specific revisions of conventional literary ideas, but rejects Larry Neal's notion that poets should place greater emphasis on sonic appeal than on craftsmanship on the printed page. Yet he is an amazing performer in his own right. Plump has composed lyrics for blues musicians, and has been accompanied by instrumentalists during his readings. His singular achievement has been his ability to treat blues and jazz music as prisms of philosophical thought, while capturing the verve of the music on the printed page. He believes that ideas and emotions expressed in black music have functioned as "hiding places,"⁴⁵ cognitive spaces in which poets and musicians have historically responded to "the cultural imperative that African-Americans invent for themselves a personal language or be permanently extinguished."⁴⁶ Where most writers have tended to approach black music as a reservoir of potential material or formal experiments, Plump reads and rewrites this material. Consequently, his poetry becomes an instrument or artistic tool "of articulation or patterning that reflect how African-Americans have always 'hammered' out constructs to define themselves."⁴⁷

One of Plump's major concerns is the extent to which black culture has been shaped by the forces of history. At times, he approaches this problem by using the blues as a metaphor, depicting the myriad ways in which blues music is interrelated to the mundanity of black working-class life. In "Speech," the poet reveals his keen understanding of black cultural memory. Taking the drum as his central image in the poem, Plump suggests that Africans used drums to express sonic messages, and that blues people have continued to employ percussive modes of expression in everyday life. When African drummers pounded "rhythms on its skin/and caressed it," the "drum[s] talked:/Language, history."⁴⁸ And although his grandmother did not play drums, her "pots and/pans talked."⁴⁹ Similarly, in "Under Class," he shows how blues music can be analyzed as narratives that reveal the social and political variables that produce and reproduce underdevelopment in African American culture. Observe the spelling of the word "underclass." Employing the ribald sarcasm that is so characteristic of the blues, Plump slyly suggests

that blues people occupy an ontological space that is difficult to describe in conventional language: the bottom rung of the working class becomes a veritable ceiling. Thus, Plumpp (re)writes his own blues narratives, elaborating upon the myths and imagery in the works of such legendary blues musicians as Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson. The poet not only interweaves seminal lyrics into the fabric of his work; he also recalls the anonymous figures who have often inspired musicians to sing. After alluding to Smith's songs "Gimme a Pig Foot" and "Empty Bed Blues" and the famous myth that Johnson sold his soul to the Devil so He could grant him superior skills on the guitar, the poet reads Johnson's music as a portrait of black men who form

their dreams after foot
prints their fathers
got whipped into.⁵⁰

And he reads Smith's music as a narrative of black herstory that

sang her through
her grandmother's troubles/
down to her footprints
on dreams/ she never saw.⁵¹

Plumpp historicizes black disfranchisement. He shows how the troubles that beset the elders affect them psychologically and economically, and these factors shape the conditions that comprise the normality of black childhood.

Plumpp also relies heavily upon history in his treatments of jazz. Alluding to classic titles and iconic figures such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, whose compositions and performances can be envisioned as paintings of sound, Plumpp weaves a mosaic narrative of black cultural history. Plumpp represents bebop music as a complex rendering of Africanist philosophical precepts and values expressed in sound, ideas whose historicity precedes the Middle Passage, extending back to traditional African religious rites and myths. This is particularly evident in *Velvet Bebop Kente Cloth*, wherein the poet breaks new conceptual ground by foregrounding dance as a defining element of black musical innovation. Unlike many observers of black music who treat musical genres as distinct expressions, Plumpp envisions jazz as the most complex representation of the range of ideas and sensibilities that suffuse black music generally. Such a reading allows him to perform an extensive analysis of the avant-garde sector of African American culture, while simultaneously maintaining that jazz is an intricate expression of bluesology. If "Blues is the wheel/bearer," jazz is "the electrical engineer,"⁵² he writes. Plumpp's focus on African American intellectual history

is therefore inevitably framed by blues culture. Although *Velvet Bebop Kente Cloth* bears little semblance to the traditional twelve-bar blues stanza, the poetry sings a brilliant testimony to the majesty of blues poetics.

Few writers have demonstrated more concern for social responsibility than Wanda Coleman. She was inspired by the ideas and hope of the Black Power Movement. She has etched in vivid color the everyday experiences of working-class black people in Los Angeles since the publication of her first book of poetry *Mad Dog Black Lady* (1979). Yet her style contrasts sharply with poets such as Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka. Coleman has attributed this, in part, to her experiences with language while growing up in Los Angeles. "[T]here is a strong Hispanic influence in my work. I grew up in the Southwest with Mexican kids."⁵³

Some critics have analyzed Coleman's poetry in relation to the blues. Having learned to play music at a young age, she is a keen student of black music. Consider the following titles: "Blue Lady Things," "Variations on a Blues Motif," "Blues for a Man on Sax," "Blues Off Key," "Jazz Whine." Like traditional blues singers, Coleman directs our attention to people who have been disfranchised. And like jazz musicians, she refuses to accept the idea that black vernacular culture cannot also signify intellectual expression. But while music is certainly an important factor in her artistic vision and style, Coleman, who is primarily a self-taught writer, employs a wide variety of poetic forms, including traditional forms such as the sonnet. Although she tended to feature black vernacular English in her early poetry, Coleman has increasingly turned to a more variegated diction, utilizing Standard English and colloquial terms to create a multi-layered representation of the English language. Such complexity is consistent with the historical reality that blacks, like most Americans, speak many versions of English; it also reflects Coleman's attempt to present a panoramic representation of the conditions and experiences that shape black culture.

Rather than emphasizing the simulation of musical effects or the approximation of musical forms on the printed page, Coleman concentrates more instead upon creating poetic illustrations of the effects and manifestations of the blues, that is, the haunting, near-surrealistic experiences that often defy conventional logic of the invisible people about whom blues musicians sing. Her poems are snapshots of the crude underbelly of American society. And when Coleman employs vernacular forms, she uses them as tools with which she transports readers behind the superficial images of blacks that are produced by American television and cinema. Her characters appear in such milieus as burger stands and bedrooms. Indeed, the private sphere, especially her characters' psychological landscape, is a major concern for Coleman.

Other themes include: institutional racism, particularly police brutality; the living conditions of poor women; and the political implications of sexual relationships. And since she lives in Los Angeles, she frames her depictions of the interrelationships between race, class, and gender within the contexts of specific policies and institutions in the city. Coleman's poem "Under Arrest" serves as a case in point. Employing an ironic point of view, she writes, "okay, up against the car. spread 'em bitch – spread 'em!"⁵⁴ Whereas Coleman creates a wolf metaphor to represent repressive state power in "Doing Battle with the Wolf" – "teeth sharp as guns glisten against his red tongue"⁵⁵ – her language in "Under Arrest" is as direct as a camera lens. That there are no replies from the recipient of the police officer's aggression points up the utter obscenity of a civil society with such huge economic and political gaps that members of its citizenry are rendered mute before agents of the state. In this discursive vacuum, Coleman's poem enacts an interpolating response. She replays the scene uncut to dramatize the terror and trauma that blacks experience routinely in their interactions with the police.

Coleman's poetry depicts a world filled with brutal conflicts, a world in which ruthless predators and prey are inevitably ensnared. Poems about sexual relationships are particularly noteworthy in this respect. In "Dinner with a Friend," for instance, the speaker is invited to dinner by an ostensible female friend who serves "crab stolen by her ex-lover the transsexual."⁵⁶ After listening to the nameless woman explain how much she wants to be friends, the speaker responds affectionately, "I like the bitch,"⁵⁷ before discovering the underlying motive of her invitation – to tell her that her "husband came by a few days ago/to put the make on her."⁵⁸ In "Women of My Color," Coleman examines the dynamics of power in sexual relationships in order to illustrate tensions between black men and women: "i follow the curve of his penis/and go down."⁵⁹ Coleman suggests that sexual relationships are political allegories: "being on the bottom where pressures/are greatest is least desirable."⁶⁰ Although the imagery refers specifically to coitus, the passage also points up the contradictory nature of the larger American economy. People living at the base of the social pyramid are paid the lowest wages while suffering the highest percentages of unemployment. To make matters worse, the competition for jobs among black men and women exacerbates existing tensions. Among the terms that black men commonly use to refer to black women, including sisters, saints, mothers, and whores, Coleman states that the term "enemy" is the most frequent. For instance, the gangster in "Mama's Man" responds to the arrival of his "bitch" with nonchalance: "he yawns, inspects her purse."⁶¹ Since the low social ceilings have restricted black men's development

and influence in mainstream American culture, some men, according to Coleman, have compensated for this shortcoming with sexual prowess.⁶²

At the same time, Coleman does not represent sexual relationships reductively as a site of uncontested male domination. In "Son of a," she writes about a handsome, albeit pathetic, would-be beautician. While he boasts his ability to "make sistuhs beautiful,"⁶³ he comes into a hamburger restaurant looking for a woman ("a mama") to support him financially because of his lack of success as a beautician. He is high on an overdose of "truenoids," and unable to control his bodily functions. Consequently, he urinates on himself. Yet when two women come in and see him, they are drawn to him. One nurtures him, telling him to put his penis back in his pants before commenting to her girlfriend, "look honey, I gots nine babies at home / so's I knows jes' what to do for *him*."⁶⁴ That the women pay for his hamburger before leaving with him suggests that one – or both – will become his new mama(s) – or, to use his term, "bitch(es)." Still, the poem remains ambiguous regarding the issue of control. Though the conclusion implies his success in exploiting women financially, the baby-image suggests that she is hardly a passive victim in this scenario. On the contrary, she is willing to expend surplus funds in a relationship wherein she wields economic and sexual capital.

As in much of Plump's poetry, the landscape that comprises the setting for Coleman's work is filled with people with limited options. Her poetry is a composite sketch of the conflicts, circumstances, and confusion that have developed from economic and political underdevelopment. Although "Dangerous Subjects" is only the title of a single poem, it is an apt summation of the entire corpus of Coleman's work. Iconoclastic in her approach to form in African American poetry, Coleman has developed a superbly crafted artistic method to probe dangerous subjects that many poets ignore.

Gil Scott-Heron was one of most insightful thinkers of the late twentieth century, yet few critics have considered him as a serious artist. Indeed, Scott-Heron's body of work presents one of the most interesting conundrums in African American cultural history. Singer, songwriter, composer, and arranger, he is also a pre-hip hop rapper and a self-taught political philosopher who theorizes most effectively in poems and songs. Scott-Heron has become famous for his sharp wit and keen political vision. However, he has achieved more notoriety in recent years for his addiction to cocaine than for the foresight and perspicacity of his lyrics. He was sentenced for possession of cocaine in 2001 and 2006, and he was again arrested in 2007 for possession. Two of his earliest recordings ironically foreshadow the singer/poet's troubles with the law. In "The Prisoner," Scott-Heron sings of a man who is

figuratively bound and shackled within a social system that evokes the writings of Franz Kafka. In the title song of his second album, *Pieces of a Man* (1971), Scott-Heron comes even closer to describing his own demise. Singing a narrative about an emotionally broken man, he intones that the police are arresting a man who has become a mere piece of his former self.

The multidisciplinary nature of Scott-Heron's work has proven equally enigmatic to cultural critics. Few question his commitment to social change. At issue are his classification as an artist and his contribution as a writer. Having published two novels before his twenty-third birthday, Scott-Heron decided thereafter to concentrate on fusing music with poetry, eschewing literary standards for the mass audience of radio stations where his rap-style poetry and soul-stirring tenor voice would be more accessible. Although his poetry does not exhibit the subtleties typically associated with literary discourse, no black poet has demonstrated the potentiality of a sound-based poetics more dramatically than Scott-Heron.

In "Winter in America" (1974), which is arguably the most important song he ever recorded, Scott-Heron reveals a political perspective that prefigures Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980), encapsulating America's history of racial strife and hypocrisy within a span of eight minutes and twenty-three seconds. As the critic Joyce Ann Joyce argues, Scott-Heron's music and poetry provides a "quintessential example of what Neal believes the Black artist should be. He is the 'priest' or Black magician who makes 'juju with the word on the world.'"⁶⁵ The overwhelming majority of writers, of course, had few musical talents. Consequently, they were compelled to employ sound figuratively, especially via parody and/or simulation. For Scott-Heron, though, the melding of song and poetry has been literal. On his recording of the song "Pieces of a Man," for instance, he sings the lines of a poem that most poets would almost certainly recite. According to Joyce, Scott-Heron's song/poems can be codified into five modes: "the poetic-blues rap (or the satiric monologue), the people's folk tale, the musical poem, the mellow lyric, and the satirical lyric."⁶⁶ At the same time, his internationalist perspective has assisted him to avoid the Manichean logic and "blacker-than-thou" contradictions that characterized some elements of black nationalist thought.

Scott-Heron is probably best known for his incendiary poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Recorded in 1970, this reflects the strident tone and rhetoric that typified Black Arts poetry, as well as the pyrotechnic, albeit prosaic, style that typified the era. Like other poets of the period, Scott-Heron expresses concern regarding ideological conditioning, pointing up television's capacity to shape public opinion on matters related to race. But, unlike other Black Arts poets who simulated sounds and effects of musicians, Scott-Heron actually

led an immensely popular band as a singer and poet. His signature song/poem "H₂O Gate Blues," which was recorded in 1973, was a pivotal breakthrough. A basic blues tune that features Scott-Heron accompanied by a trio of bass, piano, and drums, "H₂O Gate Blues" immediately addresses Richard Nixon's attempt to sabotage the 1972 presidential election. However, the poet suggests that the break-in at the Watergate Hotel and subsequent cover-up are mere symptoms of a more fundamental malady of reactionary politics:

McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown
No tap on my telephone (×2)
Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean (×2).⁶⁷

The passage is a testimony to Scott-Heron's poetic skills. Although there is little subtlety here, he commands attention with tonal semantics. Speech and music merge; his voice becomes as an instrument. This is an exemplary instance of pre-hip hop rap. The term "blown" is a reflection of black speakers' propensity for elision. Instead of using the entire phrase (blown his cover), Scott-Heron shortens it to intensify effect. Short riffs, alliterative repetition, and virtuoso rhyming establish a rhythmic cadence culminating with a vernacular interrogative that implies Nixon's culpability. With the exception of John McCord, an ex-CIA operative who was caught in the break-in, all the men listed were members of his administration.

In the sequel to "H₂O Gate Blues," "We Beg Your Pardon, America," Scott-Heron displays his penchant for humor. Mocking Gerald Ford's reactionary politics, he employs a metaphor of a model-T Ford to describe the backwardness of America's political conservatism: "In 1975 your President will/be a 1913 Ford."⁶⁸ Whereas "H₂O Gate Blues" examines the Watergate scandal as a case study of fascism run amok, "We Beg Your Pardon, America" takes up President Ford's pardon of Nixon as an exemplification of bourgeois privilege. Although blacks, who typically comprise a disproportionate percentage of the prison population, are routinely sentenced for relatively petty crimes, Nixon was not jailed. He was not only pardoned, but granted a 200,000 dollar retirement allowance, which prompted Scott-Heron's ironic response:

I'd like to retire with \$200,000 one day
San Quentin, not San Clemente!
Go directly to jail, Do not pass Go! Do not collect \$200,000.⁶⁹

The allusion to the game Monopoly sums up in stark terms the contradictions of American jurisprudence regarding issues related to race. In contrast to

liberal democracy's claim to promote justice equally, it enacts and enforces policies that disproportionately benefit the wealthiest segment of the society.

Scott-Heron's work stands as a testimony to the potential of popular poetry. Recent scholarship notwithstanding, scholars have traditionally viewed vernacular culture and intellectuality as mutually exclusive. Such binary oppositions dissolve, however, in Scott-Heron's work. He is an excellent practitioner of street-rhymes, and his poem "The Ghetto Code," written in 1978, prefigures the innovative, linguistic play (e.g., "for shizzle" to denote the phrase "for sure") for which Snoop Dog and other hip hop emcees have become famous. Yet his political vision contrasts sharply with the reactionary ideas that have become commonplace in hip hop. Fusing his street-smart disposition with a keen interest in international politics, particularly Third World politics, Scott-Heron examines the complexities and contradictions of racial politics while employing black vernacular concepts of musico-poetry.

In contrast to Scott-Heron's emphasis on incorporating poetry into popular music, Sherley Anne Williams developed a reputation as a poet who captured the poetic possibilities of late twentieth-century rural speech patterns in print. A protégée of the famous poet and critic Sterling Brown, Williams was one of the most innovative, perspicacious poets of the late twentieth century. She initially stepped onto the literary stage in 1972 when she published a book of criticism entitled *Give Birth to Brightness*. Three years later she published *The Peacock Poems*, which preceded her seminal *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* (1982). But whereas Brown formulated a blues-realism to counter the overtly racist images that were normative in American films, novels, and advertisements, Williams faced a different challenge. How could she utilize stylistic ideas implicit in black music and language to create an artistic method to depict the lives and experiences of black working-class women? Emerging during the twilight of the Black Power Movement, Williams provided valuable input in the acrimonious debate over the Black Aesthetic. Her 1979 essay "The Blues Roots of Afro-American Poetry" elaborates upon the theoretical approaches that critic Stephen Henderson examined in his controversial book *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. But as a feminist, she was also determined to show that blackness is not synonymous with masculinity; that any substantive discussion of race necessarily includes gender and class as well. Consequently, Williams illustrated the everyday experiences of black working-class women in their own unique language and cadences, ensuring that readers would be offered a broader view of African American culture.

It is not surprising that Williams turned to the blues to inform her depictions of black women in her poetry. The classic blues singers were all women singers – Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and Ida Cox to name a few. Williams not only dedicated *The Peacock Poems* to a woman named Evangeline Marie Dusuau; she entitled her first poem “Any Woman’s Blues.” But while that poem is a typical twelve-bar blues stanza, Williams does not foreground the blues as such in the book. Instead, she employs the blues metaphorically. That is, she sheds light on the various occurrences that make the blues come down on black women. In doing so, Williams captures the humor that is so intrinsic to the blues. For instance, in “Say Hello to John,” she employs a Southern-inflected version of black vernacular English to describe the experience of a young woman who is having her first baby. Inexperienced and formally uneducated, she has been deprived of vital information about childbirth. To make matters worse, Ru-ise, the older woman she lives with, is equally uninformed. Consequently, when her water breaks she “thought it was pee” and wonders if she is dreaming. When it occurs to her that her water has broken, she tells Ru-ise, who asks, “What time is it?,” advising the young woman to return to bed because “That ain’t nothin but pee.”⁷⁰ It goes without saying, of course, that Ru-ise is wrong:

Second time it happen, even she
Got to admit this mo’n pee.
... I remember the doctor smilin,
sayin, Shel, you got a son.
His bright black face above me
Sayin, Say hello to John.⁷¹

Similarly, in her second, and final, book entitled *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, Williams captures the humor in Ruby Walker’s vehement, if ironic, reply to the question of whether the legendary blues singer Bessie Smith ever used marijuana. Walker, who knew Smith personally, said that Smith did not use pot or “nothing like that”; she simply consumed “REGULAR REEFER.”⁷²

Williams fine-tunes her blues aesthetic in *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, sharpening her focus upon Smith as a metonym for black women’s cultural philosophy and vernacular artistry. Williams employs prosody to create a wide-ranging and in-depth treatment of the famous blues singer. In doing so, she shows how poetry can function as historical narrative – herstory – that restores Smith’s work and aura to the forefront of black cultural memory. In “Bessie on my wall,” which is the first in a series of poems about Smith, Williams posits Smith’s facial features as an icon of black female beauty:

the thick triangular
 nose wedged
 in the deep brown
 face nostrils
 flared on a last
 long hummmmmmmmm.⁷³

It is not merely coincidental that Williams employs “deep brown,” “nose” images here. Whereas dark brown skin and wide nostrils are usually equated with ugliness and diminished human value in conventional American thought, Williams alters the perspective, resituating them within black vernacular culture so that readers can appreciate the relatively unique characteristics of black blues women’s bodies. For instance, one line from Williams’s poem “*fragments*” reads: “She was sunlight/dapplin a man’s arm.”⁷⁴ Williams suggests that Smith, who indisputably impacted the future of American music (i.e., such genres as rock and hip hop are revisions of fundamental elements of the blues), could not have sung, hummed, or otherwise produced her spellbinding performances without instantiating the particular idiosyncrasies of her body.

Like other black women writers of the 1970s and 1980s, then, Williams revised the theoretical ideas and stylistic practices of the 1960s, displacing explicitly masculinist frameworks of blackness with herstory. Such a maneuver facilitated her in-depth treatment of working-class black women’s culture. Williams’s selection of a specific form, and later of specific, representative artists, helped her to avoid the romanticisms that sometimes marred black poetry of the 1960s. Yet it is notable that she did not restrict her focus to Southerners who migrated to America’s urban areas in the early twentieth century. In a section of *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* entitled “Letters from a New England Negro,” which comprises roughly a third of the book, Williams also writes about a freeborn black woman named Hannah who teaches school in New England in the late 1860s. Composed in epistolary form, the poems reflect Hannah’s impeccable diction and perception, which she employs in her letters that inevitably critique the glaring political contradictions of the era. Thus, Williams creates images of black women that are not monolithic. Although she employed the blues as a metaphor of black working-class culture, her vision of blackness, and finally her poetry, also includes blacks who have not lived substantial portions of their lives in vernacular circles.

Like Williams, Angela Jackson also envisioned black vernacular culture in feminist terms. As a young writer, she was a member of the OBAC Workshop. Her early efforts include *Voo Doo/Love Magic* (1974) and *The Greenville Club* (1977). Her book *Solo in the Boxcar Third Floor E* (1985) was nominated for an

American Book Award, and *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses: The Beatitudes of the Spinners* won the 1993 Chicago Sun-Times Book of the Year Award in Poetry and the Carl Sandburg Award for Poetry. Like her forebears, Jackson's recurrent themes include: music, vernacular linguistic patterns, and African American nationality. Underlying these concerns is a firm belief that she shoulders a sense of social responsibility for her work. But unlike many of the older poets, Jackson questioned the notion that form and content are mutually exclusive. While earlier poets had clearly posited the notion of a distinctly African American style, they simultaneously deemphasized the significance of form in black poetry. By way of contrast, Jackson openly proclaims her love of language, and she correlates this passion with her artistic methods and her vision of agency as a woman and a poet. For instance, in "Making the Name," Jackson sings of a passion for words so strong that inebriation serves as a metaphor. Invariably, she is compelled to consume "half a cup of syllables/first thing in the morning."⁷⁵

Jackson's poetry constitutes both a continuation of and departure from Black Arts poetics. Whereas Madhubuti disparaged the blues as a form of resignation, Jackson placed blues and black Southern culture at the center of work, elaborating upon the poetic qualities in black Southern expression. In a poem such as "Make/n My Music," she reminisces warmly about her childhood in Mississippi: "celebrate/n be/n young and Black (but we din know it)."⁷⁶ This line, which recalls Nikki Giovanni's poem "Nikki Rosa" wherein Giovanni recalls intimate moments of her childhood, is an unequivocal instantiation of the Black Aesthetic, that is, the imperative to represent the beauty of African American experiences. Jackson remembers the exhilaration stimulated by such simple pleasures as running freely in back-alleys and eating cold watermelon, and she captures the cadence and sounds of the children's language: "scream/n ... an holler/n afta the walla-melon-man."⁷⁷ But although many readers would interpret the imagery of *Solo in the Boxcar Third Floor E* as a jazz motif, Jackson reads the term "solo" – in sharp contrast to many black male poets – as a sign of solitude. Her focus is directed to the pain and loneliness that women often suffer as a consequence of men's duplicity. Jackson writes, "I, as a woman, have never discarded/my house like a snake."⁷⁸ While the first line calls attention to the callous manner in which men often abandon women, the snake image suggests deceit in sexual relationships, a recurring theme in Jackson's work. For instance, although the title of "Grits" ostensibly presages a celebration of black Southern women's cuisine, the poem is a compressed narrative of sexual politics. Within the space afforded by two short, five-line stanzas, Jackson tells the story of a woman who retaliates against a philandering lover

by throwing hot grits on his face. The first line, “all night,”⁷⁹ refers to her lover’s offense – staying out all night – while alluding to the duration in which her anger mounts to a pitch. The grits metaphor is apt. As she slowly stirs the pot, cooking the savory dish until “the grains disappear,” her anger intensifies. And when she finally throws the grits in his face – an act that we do not see – the poet tells us that the dish was

hot enough
for a man to wear
(she said) on both
his faces.⁸⁰

The phrase “both/his faces” is an improvisation on the black vernacular term “two-faceded,” which denotes duplicity. Thus, Jackson, like Williams, melds the Black Aesthetic with feminist concerns about the political implications within personal relationships, linking her with more widely read contemporaries such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, who were also emerging during the 1970s.

Many of Jackson’s poems address the issue of verbal disputes between men and women. These poems are virtual snapshots of black women who defy patriarchal norms. Although Jackson presents images of men “knock[ing] the blues up side his woman’s/head,”⁸¹ she emphasizes females’ agency in these situations. In “home trainin,” for instance, she recalls her father’s use of corporal punishment to repress her rebellious spirit. Yet in spite of the pain that she suffers from her father’s belt or extension cord, she insists upon the right to speak, and her father is unable to “heal my smart talkin/mouth.”⁸² Similarly, in “Willa Mae,” a poem about a working-class Southern black woman who wants to love and be loved without being censored, Jackson (re)creates a dialogue between two lovers. What is striking here is point of view. Readers “hear” the man’s comments from Willa Mae’s viewpoint:

Willa Mae, she say he say:
Willie, you too nice a lookin
Woman to cuss the way you do.⁸³

In addition to pointing up the musical qualities of black vernacular English, Jackson illustrates the manner in which women critically examine methods that men use to achieve power in relationships. Willa Mae cleverly reads his compliment as a foil to legitimize his disapproval of her profanity, which she employs as an instrument of agency. Her selfhood and language are “a package deal,”⁸⁴ so she tells him that, like Jackson herself, neither parents

nor preachers had curbed her tongue. "Goddamit," she defiantly says, "Nobody/in forty years part me from my mouth."⁸⁵

At times, Jackson employs humor in her treatment of gender issues. In "Song of the Writer Woman," she pokes fun at the parochial view that women artists must choose between their lovers and their art. Addressing her husband directly in each of the five stanzas, the persona describes her love affair with her poems. They act collectively as her confidant and lover, listening to her daily accounts even when she repeats herself. Although Jackson does not criticize the husband, she only uses romantic imagery when she speaks of poetry – soft, ripe fruits; undressing her clothes; and her lover proposing on bended knee. The poem accumulates intensity until the speaker comes to terms with her passion for prosody, which prompts her to a dual commitment to her husband and the poems that she figuratively refers to as a *ménage à trois*: "This could be exciting: poems&me, you&me,/ *Ménage à trois*. Permanently."⁸⁶

For Jackson, polemics have been insufficient for her objectives. She has chosen instead to describe the nuances of black working-class expression, positing perspectives from experiential knowledge and theoretical analysis. It should also be noted that Jackson does not confine her artistic methods to the refashioning of vernacular forms. As she has continued to develop, she has increasingly turned to more conventional approaches to literary diction. However, most of her best poems are clearly related to black vernacular expression.

The rise of hip hop in American popular culture significantly altered concepts of style among black youth. Just as blues and jazz musicians expressed new sensibilities in earlier periods, so hip-hop artists created a new argot and revised notions of musicianship. The new music, which relied heavily on digital technology, was a mixture of sampled beats and rhymed poetry that addressed concerns that were central to young people. As the movement spread across the nation, many of the youth became enamored, turning to poetry as a medium of expression. Poets such as Paul Beatty, Ruth Forman, Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, Carl Hancock Rux, and Tracie Morris enthralled audiences in cafés and other venues. Moore and Morris are especially noteworthy. Moore burst into prominence in 1995 when she became the first poet to win the nationally televised *Showtime at the Apollo* five weeks in a row. She also recorded with acclaimed emcee Nas on *Nastradamus* (1999). As suggested by the title of her first book, *The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth* (1997), Moore uses her voice as a linguistic instrument, simulating hip hop flow and jazz cadences. Morris, whose book is entitled *Intermission* (1998), established her reputation as a member of the famous Nuyorican Slam Team at the

Nuyorican Café in New York. She also performed her poetry on MTV's *Spoken Word: Unplugged*. Unlike Moore, however, Morris developed many of her ideas about poetics and sound in academic institutions. She holds an MFA in creative writing and has recently completed a Ph.D. degree. A trained singer, Morris combines her musical talents with aesthetic and critical theories. In live performances, she devotes considerable attention to gender issues, wowing audiences with an extemporaneous, paralinguistic style that blends beatboxing and scatting.

Many of the younger poets, however, deemphasize performance, opting instead to conceptualize poetry in traditional, Western terms. Although theories of sound-based and page-centered poetics are not mutually exclusive, the most prevalent trend in contemporary black poetry is to create literary art whose beauty and subtleties are most clearly illuminated visually. Some of the notable poets who have adopted this approach were members of writing workshops founded by black poets. Cave Canem, founded by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady in 1996, publishes anthologies and offers summer retreats and regional workshops. The Dark Room Collective was founded by Thomas Sayers Ellis and Sharon Strange in 1988. Reminiscent of the famous Umbra Writers' Workshop in the early 1960s, which included founding members Tom Dent (1932–98), Calvin C. Hernton (1932–2001), and David Henderson, as well as such stellar writers as Ishmael Reed, Norman Pritchard, Askia Touré, David Henderson, and Lorenzo Thomas, the Dark Room included acclaimed writers such as Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, and Major Jackson. Trethewey, whose first book, *Domestic Work* (2000), won the inaugural 1999 Cave Canem poetry prize, received the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 2007 for *Native Guard* (2006). Jackson's *Leaving Saturn* (2002) also won a Cave Canem poetry prize. Young has published six books of poetry, including *Most Way Home: Poems* (1998), *To Repel Ghosts: Five Sides in B Minor* (2002), *Jelly Roll: A Blues/Composed & Arranged by Kevin Young* (2003), *Black Maria: Being the Adventures of Delilah Redbone & A. K. A. Jones: Poems Produced and Directed by Kevin Young* (2005), *To Repel Ghosts: Remixed from the Original Masters* (2005), *For the Confederate Dead* (2007), and *Dear Darkness: Poems* (2008). *Most Way Home* won the First Book Award from the prestigious literary journal *Ploughshares*, and his poem "Black Cat Blues" was included in *The Best American Poetry 2005*.

In the forty years since Killens's invocation for political and cultural relevance in black writing, there have been sweeping social changes in America. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, many blacks turned to the electoral process to address their concerns. In 1970, Kenneth Gibson became the first black person elected

as mayor of a major city, and in 2008 Barack Obama became the first black man elected President of the United States. Yet many of the fundamental problems that have beset black working-class communities remain intact – crime, unemployment, poor housing, police brutality, and inadequate education. Meanwhile, the entertainment industry, particularly films and television shows, has continued to promote the idea of black inferiority by recirculating versions of age-old stereotypes. Many black poets have resisted such misrepresentation by crafting distinct, literary methods based on the black oral tradition. Such methods have facilitated poets' efforts to counter racial caricatures. As cornerstones of aesthetic and critical theories, the cultural values inscribed in songs, sermons, speech patterns, and dances provide viable alternatives to traditional Western ideas. In doing so, they reaffirm the telling observation that W. E. B. Du Bois made over a century ago – that blacks are "gifted with second-sight in this American world."⁸⁷

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New frontiers, cross-currents and convergences: emerging cultural paradigms

MADHU DUBEY AND ELIZABETH SWANSON GOLDBERG

The 1970s saw a veritable explosion of black literature, the ground for which had been prepared by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the political sphere and the Black Arts Movement in the cultural arena. The Civil Rights Movement brought about legislative changes that granted African American people political enfranchisement; however, it would be some time before these changes would be effected in practice, and their realization, even in the new millennium, remains far from complete. The end of *de jure* racial segregation opened up economic access and social mobility for certain segments of the African American population but also threatened close-knit black communities that had developed in response to a long history of exclusion and separation. In the realm of literature, this sense of communal dispersal was initially manifested as a revaluation of the political and aesthetic agenda of black cultural nationalism. To be sure, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s launched a cultural redefinition of blackness that was in part responsible for the literary innovations of postmodern African American authors. Yet these authors also chafed against Black Arts ideals of racial identity and community. In fact, literary and cultural critics broadly agree that postmodernism in the African American context is defined by a heightened attention to the intraracial differences (of class, gender, and sexuality) that had been suppressed in black cultural nationalist discourse.¹

In her essay "Learning from the 60s," Audre Lorde wrote that "Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity ... resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk."² In the immediate aftermath of BAM, Lorde and other (particularly women) writers initiated an effort to reimagine community that would continue to preoccupy African American writers in the decades to come. In 1999, novelist Randall Kenan published a travelogue, *Walking on Water: Black*

American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, sparked by the question of whether, following the material transformations wrought by the Civil Rights Movement, “there was still such a thing as ‘we’ or if that was an anachronistic term.”³ After spending four years on the road interviewing African American people from Alaska to Louisiana, Oakland to Martha’s Vineyard, Kenan reached an ambiguous conclusion reflecting both the necessity and the difficulty of conceptualizing black community at the end of the twentieth century: “The truth is that there are over thirty-six million ways to be black,” yet “black folk in this country ... still find a need for a ‘we’ to exist.”⁴ If African American literature in the post-Civil Rights period is marked by an effort to rethink the meanings of black community, this enterprise is the source of both exhilaration and anxiety. In his autobiographical essay “Confessions of a Wannabe Negro,” novelist Reginald McKnight perfectly expresses this ambivalence in describing himself as a “victim/beneficiary of the Civil Rights movement.”⁵ To McKnight, the term “victim/beneficiary” captures the uncertainty riddling black identity in the post-Civil Rights decades: did the “successful failure, the failed success of the Civil Rights movement” give birth to “a new creature ... breathless with hope and wonder” or “a mutant bastard, a monster, without a place, without a voice, illegible, indecipherable?”⁶

As African American writers search for models of black identity suited to the post-Civil Rights period, they insistently revisit Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, which has shaped explorations of African American identity throughout the twentieth century. Declaring in his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,”⁷ Du Bois defined double-consciousness as an experience of “twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”⁸ As understood and appropriated by literary artists and critics, double-consciousness came to signify the challenges presented to black identity in the long era of legalized racial discrimination, stretching from slavery to the 1960s. Whether connoting the internalization of racist norms or the difficulty of conjoining “black” and “American” into an integrated identity, the concept of double-consciousness has generally been used to describe the self-division characterizing black identity in a racially unequal society. At the end of the twentieth century, several writers and intellectuals have attempted to redraw the problem of the “color-line” by reinfecting the Du Boisean formulation of double-consciousness.

The most influential such effort is Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), subtitled *Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Building on Du Bois’s suggestion that double-consciousness can bestow the gift of “second-sight,”⁹ Gilroy

appropriates the concept in order to challenge essentialist notions of black identity. As a corrective to the racially purist, African-centered orientations of black cultural nationalism, Gilroy reanimates Du Bois's concept to emphasize the inescapably dual positioning of black diasporic subjects as the simultaneous insiders and outsiders of the modern West. Far from being a marker of racial inauthenticity, double-consciousness constitutes for Gilroy the very source of the expressive richness and critical oppositionality of black culture. Like Gilroy, Trey Ellis in his 1989 manifesto "The New Black Aesthetic" reframes double-consciousness as a condition of possibility rather than a debilitating dilemma. Citing both Jim Morrison of the Doors and novelist Toni Morrison as his cultural forebears, Ellis embraces the term "cultural mulatto" to capture the hybrid nature of black art and identity in the post-Civil Rights decades. With its obvious connotations of racial miscegenation, the cultural mulatto designation is intended to move beyond nationalist models of identity. Yet, despite his best efforts, Ellis is not entirely able to shed the baggage of racial impurity that has always accompanied the term 'mulatto': he dismisses crossover performers like Lionel Richie or Whitney Houston as "neutered mutations" rather than "thriving hybrids."¹⁰ The terminology of cultural mulattoism is further constrained by its retention of Du Bois's dualistic racial framework. While Ellis alludes to a wide spectrum of cultural influences that inform post-Civil Rights era black art and identity, the racial coordinates of his concept of the cultural mulatto (in common with Gilroy's construct of black diasporic culture) remain black and white.

Writers such as Itabari Njeri and Reginald McKnight have sought to go beyond Du Boisean double-consciousness in order to articulate multiple rather than binary axes of identification. Like Ellis, Njeri denounces "the science fiction that we [African Americans] are an unadulterated ethnic group," instead urging recognition of the "creolized" nature of not just black but all American identity. Njeri describes her peers as belonging to "the sushi and grits generation,"¹¹ a label meant to suggest that mixed racial and cultural genealogies often exceed the black and white lineage of the mulatto. In the service of this more expansive and complex notion of black identity, both Njeri and McKnight highlight the importance of intraracial differences as well as interracial conjunctions. McKnight recounts his tortuous search for "the essence of blackness," a search from which he always returned "empty-handed."¹² From this failed quest, McKnight learned not only that the meaning of blackness always depends on context, but also that the problem of black identity is a matter less of double-consciousness than of "polyconsciousness": "Someone who's black like me doesn't feel particularly torn between

one thing and another, but rather among a multiplicity of things.”¹³ Although neither Njeri nor McKnight explicitly uses the term “postmodernism,” their explorations of black identity in the post-Civil Rights period can easily be seen to exemplify a postmodern cultural politics of difference.

Acknowledging these complexities of identity, history, and aesthetics, this chapter will explore the particular inflections of black literary postmodernism(s) since 1970. African American literature had a banner year in 1970, seeing the publication of twenty-five novels along with the release of major dramatic texts and volumes of poetry. Some critics have called this moment the beginning of the second renaissance of black women’s writing; others mark it as the emergence of black literary postmodernism. Whichever rubric we use to conceptualize the burst of literary activity in that particular year, we can make some generalizations about the literature from the 1970s to the present. First is that the development of a self-consciously black postmodernism has been visible since the end of the Black Arts Movement, in the formally innovative works of major writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Charles Johnson, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. Further, black literary postmodernism can be identified by two distinct trends: textual self-reflexivity and historical revision. The main impetus of postmodern African American literature is to provoke critical self-reflection about the demands for racial representation that have historically been placed on black writers. From its origin in the nineteenth-century slave narratives, black literature has been expected to represent the race, in the two interrelated senses of realistically depicting and speaking for black experience as a whole. Postmodern African American writers self-consciously reevaluate dominant literary forms of racial representation by parodying these forms and revealing them to be textual constructs rather than authentic reflections of black life. Most literary critics agree that the “deconstructive” impulse of black postmodernism¹⁴ coexists with a continuing emphasis on the historical specificity of black culture.¹⁵ Accordingly, the period since the 1970s has seen an intensification of literary interest in the past. Even as postmodern African American writers insistently reveal the lingering grip of the historical past on the present, they also raise difficult questions about the implications of this history for post-Civil Rights explorations of black identity.

As with dominant postmodern paradigms of identity and aesthetics, the effort to render a post-1970s black “polyconsciousness” in literature involves a range of innovative formal strategies, including textual fragmentation, linguistic bricolage, and the transgression of generic and cultural boundaries. Toni Cade Bambara’s novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) sharply reveals the challenges to

literary form posed by the postmodern politics of difference. By fracturing narrative time, plot, and perspective, the novel confronts multiple forms of political affiliation (such as feminist, nationalist, ecological, and labor politics) that were rupturing the notion of unified black community by the 1970s. Indeed, literary explorations of the postmodern politics of difference were initiated in a significant sense by black women writers of the 1970s. Heeding Audre Lorde's call to explore "the creative function of difference,"¹⁶ writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Ntozake Shange conveyed at the level of literary form the ways in which racial identity intersects with other categories of identification such as class, gender, and sexuality. The formal innovations of 1970s black women's literature are extended by postmodern writers of the 1980s and 1990s, as textual fragmentation becomes a vehicle for investigating differences within the category of blackness and for subverting monolithic conceptions of black culture. For example, the Pomo Afro Homos' performance piece *Fierce Love* (1991) opened with the declaration that queer black men "are numerous and quite varied."¹⁷ Dramatizing the stories of queer black men who are devout Christians, Afrocentrists, nationalists, heavy metal fans, rappers, and opera lovers, *Fierce Love* emphatically refuses to offer a definitive or unitary portrayal of queer black male identity.

Similarly, poet-musician Saul Williams performed the character Niggy Tardust live and on his album *The Inevitable Rise and Liberation of Niggy Tardust!* (2008). Williams describes this character as a "hybrid ... a fusion. He is a nickname that I give to the up and coming or evolving perspective of young people and of all people who realize that we are one. That everything that is of this land and in this land is in us."¹⁸ Niggy Tardust, a shout-out to David Bowie's 1972 record *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, is a character born from Saul Williams's poetic consciousness, but many of the tracks on the CD are co-written with Trent Reznor of the white industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails. The CD includes covers or samples of music from Irish rock band U2, 1970s R&B group Earth Wind and Fire, and rappers Public Enemy, along with heavy literary allusions to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Such cultural sampling and performance of hybrid identity includes Niggy's appearance, which is playfully multicultural, including feathers, face-paint, and even a black and white mohawk. In the words of the character himself, "Niggy Tardust says: You know what? Fuck all that! I am as black as I am white. I am as white as I am black. I am as indigenous as I am foreign. I am as alien as I am from here. I am all of these things at once."¹⁹

Postmodern black performance artists are dramatizing not only the internal heterogeneity of black identity, but also the points of tension and convergence

among different racial groups. Particularly notable in this regard is the work of playwright Anna Deveare Smith, whose one-woman shows have examined a range of explosive events. The Rodney King beating and ensuing race revolts are her subjects in *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1992) while the Crown Heights Riot is the focus in *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1993), which reenacts the violence in the black and Jewish neighborhood following the death of a young African American boy who had been hit by a Jewish driver. Each play is constructed from hundreds of interviews conducted by the playwright with members of the various communities involved in the actual events. Smith's work is notable because of its use of perspective; she presents the point of view of each affected person through the first-person delivery that has become the trademark of her one-woman shows. Smith's embodiment of personae of different races, genders, professions, and ages (including rabbis, Korean merchants, and public figures such as Al Sharpton and Angela Davis) violates realist conventions of theatrical representation, whereby, for example, only male actors can represent men or black actors cannot represent white (or putatively raceless) characters. Unsettling such conventions, Smith's works reveal the performative dimension of all identity. In her introductions to the published scripts of her performances, Smith states that her ambition is to capture an American "identity in motion,"²⁰ an ambition best served by abandoning the "black-and-white" terms of racial dialogue in America.²¹ Smith does not shy away from the difficulties of rendering the multiracial realities of late twentieth-century America. While the format of the one-woman show holds out the promise of cross-racial identification, Smith's works refuse to contain the tensions that erupt among heterogeneous voices and perspectives.

This deployment of the first person to occupy and present multiple perspectives can be witnessed in the poetic experiment of Ai, born Florence Anthony, whose seven poetry collections (one of which, *Vice*, won the National Book Award in 1999) are comprised of dramatic monologues in the tradition of Robert Browning, presenting personae ranging from the well known, such as Alfred Hitchcock and JFK, to the unknown, such as a rioter in Los Angeles or an old man remembering his experience as a French collaborator during the Second World War. In addition to projecting voices that cross borders of gender, race, nationality, and historical period, these monologues also span the identity positions of victim and perpetrator. "The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981," for example, in the 1986 collection *Sin*, adopts the perspective of a serial murderer of black boys in Atlanta; "Go" resurrects the voice of Mary Jo Kopechne, the woman killed in the Chappaquiddick incident

involving Edward Kennedy and, interestingly, is dedicated both to Kopechne and to Kennedy. The poem tries to imagine the tragic moment of Kopechne's death beyond the media lens that singularly focused on celebrity scandal. This attempt to complicate understanding in multiple frames that move beyond fixed identity constructions and social or moral taboos, using a generic form that pushes the limits of the first-person voice, is in keeping with the poet's assertion of her own multiethnic identity as an African American, Japanese, Choctaw, Irish woman, symbolically manifested in her adoption of the name *Ai*, the Japanese word for love.

Many contemporary African American writers employ the postmodern technique of linguistic bricolage – or juxtaposition of different ethnic and regional dialects and idioms – in order to shatter the dream of a common language that can express an integral national identity. Anna Deveare Smith has said that she finds the American national character most vibrantly present in the “syntactical breaks” rather than the unities of language,²² a conviction shared by many other African American writers who employ the technique of linguistic bricolage. Texas native Harryette Mullen often includes Spanish in her poems to capture the multilingual and multiethnic experience of border towns and the global African Diaspora. In “Drinking Mojitos in Cuba Libre,” the speaker testifies plainly to the currency of tourist exploitation: “You bring your *yanqui dolor*. We show our splendid squalor.”²³ Here the impossibility of diasporic African unity is figured in the bilingual pun, with the homonym dollar/*dolor* signifying the wreckage, the *sorrow*, wrought by the flows of capital and the political schisms, impossible to transcend, that sever potential Pan-African relationships: “You black, we black./See my scar from the war in Angola./Still working for a Cuba libre./Tropicola's sweeter than Coke./Mix rum and sugar with sweat of a slave./We work for pesos and beg for your stinking dollar.”²⁴ Like other postmodern experiments with language in African American literature, Mullen's linguistic bricolage is often used to ground specific historical claims, in this case regarding the violent role of the USA in African diasporic life, beginning with the slave trade and including US military operations during the Cold War in Angola and Cuba. In *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), Mullen pushes these experiments further, composing poetic parodies and meta-poems about the strained relationships of various groups to the English language in its many unofficial and official forms: dictionary and thesaurus, nursery rhyme, personal letter, airline instruction, federal law. The poem “Xenophobic Nightmare in a Foreign Language” reconstructs one of the most influential US laws, the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed May 6, 1882, which not only suspended immigration

of Chinese laborers who had been brought to the USA first for the California gold rush and then to build the Transcontinental Railroad, but also prevented them from owning property. The poem reproduces the language of the Act almost verbatim, changing only one phrase, the object of the legislation, from “Chinese laborers” to “bitter labor.” As the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, *bitter* refers etymologically both to the experience of such immigrants in the hard labor to which they were put (“of a state: Intensely grievous or full of affliction; mournful; pitiable,”) and, in a secondary definition – “anything that has to be ‘tasted’ or endured ... virulent” – to the discriminatory stereotypes marking their reception in the USA as a “danger to the good order of certain localities within the territory.”²⁵ The absurdity of official policy and the language that brings it into being is signaled by the poem’s title, which locates the letter of the law in the surreal landscape of the nightmare and labels it a “foreign” language.

Pulitzer Prize winner Yusef Komunyakaa is another poet who plays with multilingual utterances in order to log history pertaining to the African American experience. His poems are sprinkled with the creole of his hometown Bogalusa, Louisiana, and with the languages that register his explorations of African diasporic identity: Yoruba, Ibo, Spanish. Komunyakaa’s poetry also tracks black presences in and encounters with Asian culture and geography, particularly in the poems that emerged from his experience as a journalist in Vietnam in the collection *Dien Cai Dau* (1988). These poems revive the multivalenced voices of war – US soldiers, Viet Cong, Vietnamese civilians, prostitutes from the Asian diaspora – and situate them in a geography that marks the coordinates of the contact zone. For the African American soldiers stationed there, Vietnam evokes images of California, Memphis, Atlanta, and other lost landscapes. These voices engender visions of a traumatic past, like the speaker of the poem “Roll Call,” who reflects upon the persistence of a remembered image of the reassembled boots, helmets, and rifles of dead soldiers: “Only/a few lovers have blurred/the edges of this picture.”²⁶ In spite of the harsh clarity of the image in traumatic memory, however, Komunyakaa carefully documents the unintelligibility of language as a condition similarly integral to the violence of war. The speaker in “Starlight Scope Myopia” asks, having stumbled upon a Viet Cong camp:

Caught in the infrared,/what are they saying?
Are they talking about women
or calling the Americans
beaucoup dien cai dau?
One of them is laughing. You want to place a finger

to his lips & say 'shhhh.'
 You try reading ghost talk
 on their lips.²⁷

Reflecting upon the obscuring features of language as metonym for the larger mistranslations of politics, culture, and history, this poem is situated in a broad body of work concerned with identifying the limits of experience available for communication in encounters between cultures, races, and persons.

One of the earliest novels to make use of linguistic bricolage was Fran Ross's *Oreo* (1974), which recounts a biracial girl's mock-heroic journey in search of her father. The novel contains a mix of languages, including Latin, French, Yiddish, black vernacular, and even an invented children's language called cha-key-key-wah. Leaving most of its non-English phrases untranslated, the narrative voice of *Oreo* defies linguistic and cultural synthesis, representing its cacophony of tongues as an aesthetically enabling rather than anxiety-provoking condition. Ross also blurs boundaries between high and low cultures, a characteristically postmodern strategy, as the narrative voice flits rapidly and discontinuously between vulgar and erudite linguistic registers. A representative passage describes the motto of the novel's heroine, Oreo, as follows: "The motto was *Nemo me impune lacessit* – ... 'Ain't no nigger gon tell me what to do. I'll give him such a *klop* in the *kishkas*.'" ²⁸ As suggested by its title, the novel anticipates Trey Ellis's celebration of cultural mulattoism by more than a decade, featuring a protagonist who delights in the racial inauthenticity of the 'oreo' label.

Later texts such as Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* (1993) and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) rely on similar boundary-crossing techniques in order to convey the heteroglossia of postmodern American culture. The linguistic tones of Beatty's novel, which parodies the narrative of racial immersion, move from a banal "proper" (read: white) English to what Will Hermes has called "a sort of linguistic sampling – a flurry of mass media allusions, Spanglish, hip-hop rhyming, allusions to ancient Greek and Elizabethan and African and diaspora culture."²⁹ *Japanese by Spring*, Reed's satirical novel about the institutionalization of multiculturalism in the academy, incorporates untranslated chunks of 'other' languages such as Yoruba and Japanese, launching a hilarious assault on "monolingualism." The "English Only" movement presented in the novel is opposed by the ideal of a "Glossio America."³⁰ Reed's use of linguistic sampling achieves the ultimate end of provincializing "Standard" English, stripping it of its status as the official language of the nation. The author of *Japanese by Spring*, described as "mongrelized Ishmael Reed (African, French, Irish, Cherokee)," ³¹ breaks into the

narrative to assert that Yoruba, spoken by millions of people in West Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean, is more accurately characterized as a “global” language than as a racial “dialect.”³²

As in Reed’s novel, Fran Ross’s play with language also carries deep political significance about the construction and validation of racial identities. *Oreo* contains several meta-fictional passages that explicitly question not only the conventions used to represent black vernacular speech in literature, but also the implicit hierarchy of “Standard” (race-neutral) English and racial “dialect.” In *Oreo*, the narrative flow is abruptly interrupted by a chapter subtitled “Aside on Louise’s Speech,” which defamiliarizes the long-standing practice of rendering Southern black vernacular through syntactic mutilation and typographical aberration: “the substitution of an apostrophe for every dropped g, missing r, and absent t would be tantamount to *tic douloureux* of movable type.”³³ Significantly, Louise’s immersion in Southern black vernacular is but one way in which her character unsettles notions of racial authenticity. Parodying the nefarious practice of “measuring” blood and color (epitomized in the infamous “one-drop rule”), Ross constructs a 1–10 linear scale of color in which 1 signifies white and 10 signifies black: “In the DNA crapshoot for skin color, when the die was cast, so was the dye ... Louise is fair, very fair, an albino *manquée* (a just-off-the-scale-1).”³⁴ Still, despite the fact that she could effectively pass for white, had moved from Virginia to Philadelphia when she was five years old, and that “everybody around her sounded eastern seaboard neutral,” Ross’s narrator informs us that “Louise Clark’s southern accent was as thick as hominy grits,”³⁵ effectively debunking the notion of a fixed causal chain among race, place, and language in the African American idiom.

The fact that so many postmodern African American authors are reveling in the idea of a carnivalesque, mongrelized America should not be mistaken for glib affirmation of multiculturalism. Even as they invent novel ways of reconfiguring racial identities and cultures, writers like Ishmael Reed and Paul Beatty also voice reservations about the ongoing institutionalization of multiculturalism. While Gunnar, the hero of *The White Boy Shuffle*, echoes Trey Ellis in calling himself a “cultural alloy,”³⁶ the novel sharply critiques the contradictory logic underlying institutional discourses and practices of multiculturalism. Gunnar is the only black student at “Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica’s all-white multicultural school,” where the common pedagogical approach, as embodied in a teacher named Ms Cegeny, is to either erase or fetishize racial difference.³⁷ If Beatty satirizes a society torn between color-blindness and color-mania, Reed underlines the profitability of racial and cultural differences to commodity capitalism:

"heterogeneity is the way to go when competing in the global economy."³⁸ Perhaps the most powerful critique of multiculturalism appears in Colson Whitehead's novel, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), which traces the career of a nomenclature consultant, or an advertising agent responsible for coining catchy labels for products. Apex is the name given by the protagonist to a best-selling new brand of band-aids that come in all colors of the melanin spectrum, once again indicating the economic advantages of multiculturalism. With regard to the catchy slogan for this brand – "Apex hides the hurt" – the narrator remarks that the "deep psychic wounds of history ... could be covered by this wonderful adhesive bandage. It erased."³⁹ Indeed, one of the most difficult challenges confronting postmodern black writers is the task of reckoning with the changing demographic and cultural realities of a multiracial nation without erasing the specificities of African American history. As Beatty riffs in his poem "At Ease":

what's the latin
scientific
slave name
for pretty peacocks
whose feathers span the flesh spectrum
but are stuck on with wax
it looks nice
but can it fly
look up in the sky
itsa bat
itsa crow
no its supernigger/indian/chicano/womanist/gay/asian everything.⁴⁰

Here Beatty connects postmodern identity politics with that other long history of naming, the one originating in the scientific racism of the Enlightenment that measured blood and decided fates based upon those calculations. The final line in this fragment counterbalances the proud – heroic, even – reclamation and assertion of identity in the multicultural period with the dissolution of substance that lurks in the identification of one’s self with an identity “tag.”

An early postmodern literary text to address the challenge of balancing cultural retention with a hybridity that risks dilution, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) conjures black culture as a dynamic and syncretic phenomenon with sources in European, classical Egyptian, African, and American cultures. The novel is written in the form of a detective story driven by the search for a missing "text" of blackness. While this text remains elusive and difficult to

categorize, its improvisatory and mutable character is affirmed as the defining feature of black culture. What makes *Mumbo Jumbo* postmodern is that it deflates not only master-narratives of European dominance but also influential counter-discourses of black cultural opposition such as the Black Arts Movement. Reed parodies the BAM injunction that art should transparently reflect the truth of black experience by cramming his novel with pseudo-realist intratexts, including photographs, footnotes, newspaper clippings, and excerpts from (actual as well as made-up) books of history. For Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Mumbo Jumbo* is a quintessentially postmodern text because of its self-reflexive use of signifying – a device of repetition and revision – to contest the Black Arts conception of blackness as essence. As Gates argues, Reed textualizes the meaning of blackness, revealing that it “is produced in the text only through a complex process of signification.”⁴¹ In common with Reed, many postmodern African American writers challenge the Black Arts notion of blackness as essence by drawing attention to the play of signifiers in the literary text, the materiality of the medium of representation. The experimental formal strategies of postmodern black literature, such as parody or self-reflexivity, are designed to defamiliarize authoritative modes of racial representation.

Gates’s concept of signifying as a device of repetition and revision has perhaps been most readily embraced by critics writing on postmodern African American drama. The most prominent object of parody in post-1970s black drama is the performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy – not surprising, given that the minstrel tradition, dating back to the nineteenth century, forms the earliest source of the racist iconography haunting US popular culture even at the turn of the twenty-first century. Kim Euell remarks that revision of minstrel imagery and conventions is so pervasive in contemporary black theater as to constitute an entire sub-genre in itself.⁴² Euell surveys a wide range of plays to reveal the various approaches to minstrelsy taken in postmodern black drama, from reappropriation of stereotypes to meta-theatrical consideration of the historical legacies that shadow black performance in the present.

For example, the minstrel stereotype of the “coon” is resignified in Michael Henry Brown’s *King of Coons* (1994) and in Matt Robinson’s monologue *The Confessions of Stepin Fetchit* (1993), while George Wolfe’s landmark play *The Colored Museum* (1986) and Robert Alexander’s *I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle – The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1990) refashion the Topsy stereotype, originating in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, into a defiant figure inspired by hip-hop culture. In Alexander’s adaptation of Stowe’s novel, characters often break the

mimetic illusion, by speaking as actors, deviating from the script, stealing scenes, and rewriting the ending. Like Alexander, many other postmodern playwrights rely on the meta-theatrical device of the play-within-the-play to stage dramas of creative misappropriation. In Carlyle Brown's *The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show* (1991), the performance of minstrelsy is transformed into an act of protective mimesis: in the late nineteenth-century setting of the play, African American actors put on black-face make-up in order to escape identification from a lynch mob gathering outside the theater door. For all these playwrights, self-reflexive enactment of minstrelsy becomes the occasion for confronting the history of black performance in America. The contradictory claims of this history on contemporary black dramatists and performers are eloquently expressed by the character of Topsy in Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*: "whereas I can't live inside yesterday's pain, I can't live without it."⁴³

In his influential essay, "Signifyin(g) on African-American Theater," Harry Elam shows that Wolfe's parody in *The Colored Museum* is directed not only at the minstrel tradition but also at popular conventions of counter-representation found in black women's drama. In the segment titled "The Last Mama on the Couch Play," Wolfe mocks the naturalist form of Lorraine Hansberry's highly successful domestic drama *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Wolfe's parody extends beyond Hansberry to a broader female tradition of black drama, as is clear from a character such as Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones, whose name is a composite of the names of male characters from *Raisin* and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls* (1976). In signifying upon these playwrights, who have become known for their uplifting portraits of strong black women, Wolfe clearly intends to distance his own theater from oppositional drama that lays claim to authentic representation. Much like Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Wolfe parodies various texts of blackness in order ultimately to affirm a notion of black culture that exceeds all labels and definitions. However, the fact that Wolfe's parody is aimed at Shange (among others) is deeply ironic considering that it was black women playwrights of the 1970s who initiated the experimental trends that would be taken up by subsequent postmodern playwrights such as Wolfe himself. With *for colored girls*, Shange invented a new theatrical genre, the "choreopoem," which blended poetry, song, music, dance, and prose monologues, performed by the various characters who symbolize the range of women's experiences. The collage-like form of Shange's play also broke with conventions of naturalist drama such as linear plotting and three-dimensional characterization. One of the most radical effects of Shange's theater was to highlight the improvisatory and shifting

nature of black identities, which are created rather than reflected by the process of performance.

The anti-realist aesthetics of Shange's theater – encapsulated in the metaphor of the "broken mirror"⁴⁴ – bear a rather complicated relation to the Black Arts Movement. Although it is generally associated with straightforward realism and aversion to formal experimentation, the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s sponsored vital innovations in the genre of drama. As Kimberly Benston argues, Black Arts drama achieved a shift from mimesis (or representation of action) to methexis (or communal collaboration in action), a shift that transfigured the naturalist techniques that had thus far dominated African American drama.⁴⁵ Benston is careful to clarify that this shift cannot be categorized as postmodern, in that Black Arts movement dramatists deployed post-naturalist techniques not to abandon mimesis altogether but to inaugurate a "visionary realism," a dramatic form that could adequately represent an emergent and authentic form of blackness.⁴⁶ The concept of methexis helps to account for many of the experimental strategies of Shange's drama, including flattening of characters, use of jazz improvisation to transcend the restrictive scripts of the past, and a progressive (albeit discontinuous) movement from victimization to self-possession. When Shange's character Sechita invites the audience to "twitch hips wit me cuz ... I wanna whirl with you,"⁴⁷ she dramatizes a decidedly methexic conception of black theater as a participatory rite of communal reinvention. Subsequent black women playwrights such as Glenda Dickerson similarly spurn the conventions of naturalist drama – Dickerson wittily quips that "well-made ... was a phrase which best modified beds"⁴⁸ – in favor of a theatre of methexis. Dickerson has fashioned a new dramatic genre, the performance dialogue, which not only synthesizes myth, ritual, black vernacular traditions, and testimonies but also incorporates the audience as a vital player in the theatrical scene.

Shange and Dickerson also subvert the principles of naturalist drama by incorporating meta-theatrical devices that resignify the most disabling conventions for representing blackness on the stage. For example, in Shange's *spell #7* (1979), an enormous minstrel mask hangs over the stage and grotesquely presides over the play's action. But while acknowledging that her own practice as a playwright is haunted by the lingering history of minstrelsy, Shange also reappropriates this history, recasting the Interlocutor (a staple character in minstrel shows who introduced characters and provided transitions between scenes) as a magician engaged in a communal rite of exorcism. Likewise, Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson exuberantly reinvent the Interlocutor figure in *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1992). On a stage set

resembling a carnival sideshow, this play opens with the appearance of La Madama Inter-Lock-It-Togetherer, a variant of the Interlocutor who is here synthesized with the Mammy stereotype. As La Madama begins the show with the command, "Stereotypes, be seated,"⁴⁹ audiences may expect the play to follow a corrective trajectory from dehumanizing caricature to three-dimensional personality. But as Clarke and Dickerson clarify in a prefatory note to the play, their "postmodern Menstrual Show" will "attempt to rewrite Black female identity into existence" by working within rather than by disclaiming the minstrel format.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the play offers a contradictory portrait of Aunt Jemima as the "Grand Mammy of lies,"⁵¹ a politically incorrect and business-savvy woman who attains great wealth and acclaim by exploiting the Mammy stereotype. In true postmodern fashion, Clarke and Dickerson disavow the strategy of reclaiming an integral identity that hides behind the stereotype, instead proposing to "find ourselves" by "wear[ing] the mask."⁵²

While Clarke and Dickerson, like Shange, disrupt mimesis with the ultimate goal of reinventing black identity, playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks create a grim theater of misrecognition that opens up what Philip Kolin calls "a new world of postidentity."⁵³ Kennedy's best-known plays from the 1960s dramatize the schizophrenic and alienating nature of racial identity in America by either splintering a single character into multiple (black and white) personae played by different actors, as in the case of Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, or displacing a character along a chain of substitute identities, like the protagonist of *The Owl Answers* (1965), named in the Cast of Characters as "SHE who is CLARA PASSMORE who is the VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL."⁵⁴ Both these plays feature black actors in white masks or make-up that fails to conceal the black skin underneath. Literalizing Frantz Fanon's metaphor of *Black Skin, White Masks*, these plays reveal the disabling consequences of double-consciousness. With its black female protagonists who unsuccessfully impersonate iconic white figures such as Queen Victoria, Kennedy's earlier drama persistently stages scenes of aborted or perverted mimesis.

While Kennedy's plays from the 1960s have been described as texts of "modernist fragmentation,"⁵⁵ her 1976 play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* takes a somewhat more playful approach to the dilemma of racial double-consciousness. The setting of the play splices together scenes from the life of Clara, a black female playwright, and vignettes from Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s featuring glamorous movie stars such as Bette Davis and Shelley Winters. These juxtaposed scenes foster an impression of discordance and pathos, as audiences witness Clara's absurd attempt to envision her life as

a Hollywood movie. But the play takes an unexpected (and perhaps characteristically postmodern) turn when, instead of Clara mimicking the roles of box-office stars, it is they who deliver lines from the play that Clara is writing about her life. As Bette Davis and Shelley Winters assume the role of Clara, the play provokes critical reflection about the racial boundaries that implicitly shape cinematic and theatrical representations. By staging an exceptional scene of cross-racial identification, Kennedy makes her audiences all the more keenly aware of the conventions that normally confine black performers and playwrights to the niche of racial particularity and preclude them from representing universal humanity.

Similarly, the prolific playwright Suzan-Lori Parks employs meta-theatrical devices to estrange audiences from the constraining history of black characterization in drama. Referring to her dramatis personae as “figures, figments, ghosts” rather than “characters,”⁵⁶ Parks peoples her plays with one-dimensional caricatures and mute stereotypes that repel audience desires for identification. Kevin Wetmore has identified various recurring aspects of meta-theatre in Parks’s plays, including heightened attention to costumes and make-up, scenes of characters rehearsing for performances, plays-within-plays, and staged audiences.⁵⁷ Taken together, these devices are meant to interrupt the mimetic illusion and to make audiences take stock of the hidden racial assumptions that often inform their roles as spectators. In the first part of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986), a scene of ghetto realism replete with cockroaches is suddenly suspended by the appearance of a Naturalist standing at a podium. As he lectures about his position of unobserved spectatorship, construing the characters Molly and Charlene as creatures in their primitive habitat, Parks brings out the dehumanizing logic implicit in his naturalist perspective; what’s more, Parks compels audiences to confront their own possible investment in this logic by aligning their position as viewers with that of the Naturalist. In *Venus* (1995), Parks’s disquieting play about Saartjie Baartman, the African woman whose body was exhibited in early nineteenth-century England and France as a natural curiosity, the Chorus of Spectators acts out a voyeuristic consumption of black female sexuality. Refusing to offer the audience the possibility of a different sort of gaze or to imbue Venus with oppositional agency, the play exemplifies Parks’s characteristic strategy of thwarting demands for authentic representation. But Parks’s challenge to ideals of racial authenticity should not be taken to imply that her sole purpose is to stage an unnerving theater of inauthenticity. Instead, her plays, including characters with names like Aretha Saxon, revel in acts of cultural misappropriation even as they reveal the steep costs of

cultural dispossession. In her essays about her practice as a playwright, Parks explicitly describes the formal inventiveness of her plays as a challenge to black nationalist aesthetics. Alluding in particular to the political dogmatism, binary racial categories, and prescriptive aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, Parks asserts in “An Equation for Black People Onstage” that “there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’” and that “African-Americans should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being.”⁵⁸

Poetic response to the limitations and identity prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement in the work of hip-hop poets such as Paul Beatty and Thomas Sayers Ellis is delivered in biting satire and parody that sometimes speaks itself directly, as in Beatty’s “At Ease,” wherein the poem’s speaker calls out

hey leroi
 I joined this peoples army
 to seek that quintessential beat freedom
 that only white boys seem to achieve
 the rest of us still dream about being so casual
 being able to act up
 with that bill murray I don’t give a fuck boom shaka laka
 boom shaka laka
 chief house rocker attitude.⁵⁹

When he addresses Amiri Baraka by his birth name, LeRoi Jones, Beatty conjures the complex identity that marks the heroic figure of the Black Arts Movement, a black man whose first wife was white, and who was part of New York’s generation of white bohemian poets of the Beat generation. Beatty signals the difficulty of literary heritage for new black poets who, “when asked to/present the colors of their flag/they go *white and ummmm/bob kaufmann aaaand lets see uhhhh oh yeah the angry guy*,”⁶⁰ the latter a reference to Baraka. Beatty, a master of the short poem exemplifying modes of signifying, also uses this form to advance his postmodern critique of identity construction. For instance, “Daryl Patterson and Bugs Bunny’s Black Nationalist Cheerleading Camp” offers cutting satire of black nationalist aesthetics in the postmodern context: “Ricka Rocka! Ricka Rocka!/ Sis Boom Ba!/ Malcolm X! Malcolm X!/ Rah! Rah! Rah!”⁶¹ Calling forth the evacuation of substance in the programmatic chant of radically authentic blackness, Beatty acknowledges the pernicious effects of cultural racism while interrogating the limits of a prescribed resistance to it.

Employing meta-poetic technique, Thomas Sayers Ellis presents reflexive commentary on the state of black poetry in the post-Black Arts period in

"Ways To Be Black in a Poem," teasing out the overlay of textuality and orality, of the "elite" literary tradition and the folk aesthetic, and of the demands of black cultural nationalism: "You'll need a talk, an oral walk/ Something natural and recognizable by your folk/ Something of music and something of meaning/ A style capable of running-off-at-the-mouth/ ... Breakfast and Blackfist."⁶² Like Beatty, who may poetically call Baraka out but still cites him as referent, Ellis is also interested in engaging with the Black Arts Movement, as evidenced in his project *QC: NFBP (Quotes Commentary: Notes for Black Poets)*, which, according to an interview with Charles Rowell, originated in a rereading of Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* as a way to "extend, in a very simple way, the exploration of black aesthetics gathered there."⁶³

The use of self-reflexive devices to question the representational standards of the Black Arts Movement may be even more sharply pronounced in the genre of the novel. This is not surprising, given that Black Arts practitioners and critics largely overlooked the novel because of its difficulty, relative to poetry and drama, in forging a direct and participatory relationship between artist and audience. During the 1970s, writers uneasy with Black Aesthetic norms of racial representation refashioned the novel into a capacious and flexible object that eluded artistic and political classification. At the core of this experimentation was a pointed violation of the realist conventions that had governed African American literature since the fugitive slave narratives. Whereas realist aesthetics had historically served to reinforce the social-protest function of black literature, novelists such as Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major broke from social and psychological realism in their efforts to shed the burden of racial representation. In a much-cited scene from one of Reed's early novels, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), a character declares independence from a restrictive aesthetic of social realism (which Reed most often aligns with black cultural nationalism) by asserting that the novel "can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons,"⁶⁴ a statement echoed by the narrator of Clarence Major's *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975): "A novel is anything. Fiction is a stained glass window."⁶⁵ Like Shange's "broken mirror," Major's metaphor of a stained glass window highlights the opacity of the medium of representation, a gesture common to postmodern African American works across the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama.

Clarence Major is a crucial yet somewhat anomalous figure in African American literary history, in that his formal experimentation with the genre of the novel took a direction – toward meta-fiction, or fiction primarily

concerned with the process of writing fiction – rarely pursued by black novelists. Joe Weixlmann describes *Reflex and Bone Structure* as one of the very few meta-fictions in African American literature.⁶⁶ In this parody of a murder mystery or detective novel, a character named Cora dies several times and of different causes over the course of the narrative, which jumps discontinuously between various times and places. Major sabotages the referential function of literary language by sprinkling the narrative with blatantly implausible scenes in which, for example, Cora marries Fidel Castro or rubs shoulders with Clark Gable at a party. The novel is written from the perspective of an unreliable first-person narrator who often laments his inability to bring characters into focus or to unify the plot's fragments into an interconnected whole. Disavowing any ambition to depict an actual world that exists outside the literary text, the narrator flaunts his own willful and utterly arbitrary power to fabricate reality: "I want this book to be anything it wants to be ... Let it walk. I want it to run and dance. And be sad. And score in the major league all-time records. I want it to smoke and drink and do other things bad for its health. This book can be anything it has a mind to be."⁶⁷ Repeatedly calling attention to its own status as an artifact, the novel ultimately reads as a deeply moving meditation on the rift between language and reality, an elegy on the failure of words to capture ontological essence: "I wait for Cora to come back. The word Cora is here but Cora herself isn't."⁶⁸

In subsequent novels, Major began explicitly to link his formal experimentation with the question of racial representation. For example, *Emergency Exit* (1979) includes intrusive authorial commentary on those details "the realistic reader" is likely to find meaningful⁶⁹ or on how characters are behaving as if they had come straight from the pages of "deterministic"⁷⁰ or "illusionistic" fiction.⁷¹ Dedicated to "the people whose stories don't hold together," the novel is a chaotic pastiche of intratexts, including expressionistic paintings (by Major himself), employment notices, excerpts from telephone directories, and quotes from dictionaries of architecture and folklore. The longest intratext contained in the novel is a schedule for a conference on door and threshold symbolism to be held in the town of Inlet, Connecticut. Part of the conference program is a panel, "Does an Inlet Citizen Need To Be Represented?" featuring a paper on Booker T. Washington by "The Black Professor."⁷² A subsequent chapter develops the professor's character as one who is "consumed by his racial identity" and who aspires to someday "publish the definitive work on the Black Experience."⁷³ Major's critique of the Black Aesthetic – which he has denounced in an interview for "stifling" artistic freedom⁷⁴ – becomes clear on the following page, with a thinly veiled reference to Addison Gayle (here

Addison Giles) holding forth on the “Responsibility of the Black Writer to the Black Community.”⁷⁵ Defying the ideal of an “all-encompassing black aesthetic,”⁷⁶ Major’s novel *My Amputations* (1986) focuses on a writer who travels across the USA, Europe, and Africa in search of a coherent aesthetic identity. Described as an impostor, the author figure in this novel sifts through a host of eclectic cultural references ranging from Jean Toomer and Richard Wright to Henri Matisse and a Celtic Muse. Dedicated to “those who must find themselves,” *My Amputations* ultimately refuses to resolve the dilemma of artistic double-consciousness in the direction of black authenticity, instead leaving its impostor-author masked and marooned in Africa at the end of the novel.

Although no other African American novelists have chosen to write the pure form of meta-fiction exemplified by Major’s early novels, many have selectively employed meta-fictive devices, especially authorial intrusion, to muddy the racial authenticity and mimetic transparency of the text. For example, when a character called Ishmael Reed appears in *Japanese by Spring* and begins to displace the narrative of Chappie Puttbutt, we might expect him to supply a more reliable perspective that will override Puttbutt’s self-serving account of racial identity and interracial relations. And the Reed character does accomplish this to an extent, but is in turn deflated for his populist pretensions to racial authenticity, as an omniscient narrator observes that “Homey Ishmael Reed” wore “homey clothes” and ate pork rinds in order “to appear to be a man of the people.”⁷⁷ In many of John Edgar Wideman’s novels, particularly *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) and *Fanon* (2008), authorial digressions are laden with anxiety about the fiction-writer’s inability to mirror social reality. Akin to the narrator’s assertion in Major’s *Reflex and Bone Structure* that he is “extending reality, not retelling it,”⁷⁸ the author surrogate in *Fanon* wonders, “Why pretend anything can be established by words except other words?”⁷⁹ The meta-textual passages in Wideman’s novels overtly explore the racial dimensions of what the surrogate author in *Fanon* calls the “problem of representation,”⁸⁰ as questions about narrative realism converge with concerns about the black novelist’s perceived obligation to speak for the race.

Meta-fictive novels by Major, Reed, and Wideman, in common with other postmodern black literature, often engage problems of racial representation by parodying established literary and cultural conventions for representing blackness. These include the racial stereotypes of mainstream US culture as well as predominant genres of the African American literary tradition. The use of parody in postmodern black fiction, as in drama, is marked by a refusal to correct misrepresentations by way of more realistic and reliable representations. In this regard, once again, black women’s literature published in the

immediate aftermath of the Black Arts Movement emerges as a vital source of postmodern formal innovation. Novels such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976) undermine the very notion of character through a frenzied recycling of racist and sexist stereotypes, including the castrating matriarch, the victim, the mammy, and the hypersexual black man or woman. In *The Flagellants* (1967), Carlene Polite (see Chapter 12), a crucial yet critically neglected progenitor of black literary postmodernism, presents an entirely flat character named Ideal struggling unsuccessfully to break out of the matriarch stereotype into "three-dimensional being."⁸¹ What makes all these novels so intensely disquieting is that they entrap the reader as well as the characters within claustrophobic narrative patterns of repetition that offer no ultimate release or redemption.

While maintaining the trade in racial caricature, later postmodern texts often take a more playful and exuberant approach to parody. As Rolland Murray persuasively argues, novelists such as Darius James and Paul Beatty treat the disintegration of authentic racial identity as an aesthetically generative rather than anxiety-provoking occasion.⁸² Even the most degrading traditions of racial representation become pretexts for formal experimentation in novels such as James's *Negrophobia* (1992) and Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, both of which revel in exaggerated and stylized parody of racist minstrel imagery. James's text, a hybrid of novel and screenplay, raids American mass and popular culture for its one-dimensional cast of characters, which includes Lil' Black Zambo, Talking Dreads, and Uncle H. Rap Remus. Beatty's novel, a parody of the quest and racial initiation narratives, opens with a chapter expounding the minstrel legacy transmitted to the protagonist by his paternal forebears. In common with Darius James and other postmodern writers, including Reginald McKnight who defines blackness as "a set of codified and repeatable performances,"⁸³ Beatty's cartoonish portrayals of his hero's ancestors – among them Ludwig Kaufman, manager of white musical acts with names like The 4 Cops and Gladys White who make money ripping off Motown R&B – are more hilarious than they are disconcerting, flaunting the sheer inventiveness of the writer in the face of a long and crippling history of racial misrepresentation.

In common with playwrights such as George Wolfe, Beatty directs his parody not only at dominant traditions of racial representation such as minstrelsy but also at modes of counter-representation that claim to capture the core of black culture. One such mode that Beatty mercilessly satirizes in *The White Boy Shuffle* is ghetto realism. The story of Gunnar's immersion into blackness is initiated by his family's move from Santa Monica to a West Los

Angeles ghetto. As Gunnar feels himself “becoming so black” after vandalizing cars or playing basketball,⁸⁴ Beatty underscores the hypermasculine posturing involved in contemporary urban styles of racial authenticity, particularly those associated with hip-hop culture. Beatty and other postmodern novelists employ the meta-fictive device of the book-within-the-book in order to deflate prevalent conceptions of black cultural essence. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, after Gunnar publishes a volume of poetry titled *Watermelanin*, he is lionized by the national media as his generation’s most authentic voice of ghetto experience. But even the title of Gunnar’s book debunks hip-hop notions of racial authenticity, suggesting their continuities with blackface minstrelsy (a connection also powerfully made in Spike Lee’s 2000 film *Bamboozled*).

Other writers, including Ishmael Reed, Percival Everett, and Trey Ellis, similarly feature fictional authors and books within their novels, in order to critique the ways in which certain literary genres get marketed and sold as most truly expressive of black culture. In his notorious novel *Reckless Eyeballing* (1988), Ishmael Reed attributes the crossover popularity of black women writers to their predilection for black-male-bashing. *Wrong-Headed Man*, a play by Tremonisha Smarts, the fictive dramatist in the novel, recycles racist caricatures of black men as brutes and is acclaimed for its realism by white reviewers and audiences. Closely resembling Tremonisha Smarts is Juanita Mae Jenkins, the black female writer travestied in Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure* (2001). Jenkins’s novel, *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, with its uplifting portrait of a strong black matriarch, becomes a national phenomenon, provoking the novel’s author-protagonist Thelonius “Monk” Ellison to write a counter-text titled *My Pafology* under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. While Ellison’s experimental postmodern novels remain obscure because they are deemed “not black enough,”⁸⁵ his spoof of ghetto realism becomes a runaway bestseller. Everett’s identification of ghetto realism with a female author is curious, given the strong association of this genre with black male writers, an association Everett himself acknowledges by closely modeling the plot of *My Pafology* on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Like Reed and Everett, Trey Ellis in his novel *Platitudes* (1988) presents a black woman author who has attained a disproportionately high level of success in the marketplace and whose very name, Isshee Ayam, signals her pretensions to authenticity. Ellis mercilessly mocks Ayam’s prose, which is saturated with all the stylistic markers of the Southern folk aesthetic popularized by black women novelists such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. In *Platitudes*, chapters from Ayam’s book manuscript alternate with sections written by a commercially unsuccessful black male writer, Dewayne Wellington. Set in New York City, these sections

militate against the idea of racially authentic culture by incorporating a diverse array of mainstream and subcultural intratexts, including shareware porn, video war games, films like "Computer Camp," PSAT tests, TV game shows, and science fiction. While Isshee Ayam dismisses Wellington's depiction of multicultural urban America as a postmodern gesture of racial betrayal, he in turn takes issue with her nostalgic idealization of black folk culture. The gendered battle of the books presented in *Platitudes* – between the oralized, Southern, female narrative of Isshee Ayam and the multitextual urban narrative of Dewayne Wellington – is ultimately suspended by the sexual union of the two authors, also meant to symbolize a reconciliation between folk and postmodern aesthetic styles.

This kind of gesture, suggesting that textual self-reflexivity is not necessarily incompatible with celebratory reclamation of black oral culture, has been distinctive of a significant strand of black postmodernism that can be traced back to Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, where the text of blackness is simultaneously a book and a compendium of performance practices. It is not surprising, then, that *Mumbo Jumbo* constitutes the core of Gates's effort to produce a distinctively black literary theory that synthesizes orality and textuality, postmodern and black vernacular cultures, in his seminal theoretical work, "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" (1983). In addition to exploring postmodern techniques of repetition and revision, Gates's theory of signification also filters the poststructuralist analysis of the unstable relation between sign and signifier through the much older black vernacular tradition of signifying. Tracing the rhetorical practice of signifying to classic trickster figures in Yoruba mythology, Gates emphasizes the ways in which verbal strategies indigenous to black oral culture anticipated the poststructuralist deconstruction of language and meaning. Just as black postmodernism in the United States reflects upon breakdowns of meaning in historically specific contexts, so too does Gates's concept of signifying attempt to grasp postmodernism in the particular context of black vernacular culture.

Aldon Lynn Nielsen notes that this privileging of orality in the reception and theorizing of African American literature represents a historical logic that situates African American literary production within oral traditions first brought from Africa and in the subsequent vernacular forms, including blues and jazz, deriving from those traditions. In *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (1997), however, he reminds us that American and African American literary histories are incomplete without reference to the ways in which black poets were deeply invested in specific textual innovations, including what he calls "forms of discrepant engagement,

decomposition, psychovisualism, transrealism, the calligraphy of black chant, and a host of other modes of ‘worrying the line.’”⁸⁶ Here, “worrying the line” references critic Stephen Henderson, who employed the phrase in his important *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1972), to evoke both the “folk expression for the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage” and the “verbal parallel ... in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow for affective or didactic content.”⁸⁷ While other critics define the “line” as a reference to broad literary genealogies, “worried” or adjusted by non-traditional elements, Nielsen also references more specifically what he considers to be an obscuring “line” between oral and written poetics, or between vernacular poetry considered to be authentically “black” and poetry that shared techniques and commitments with broader avant-garde movements such as the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E or Black Mountain poets. Indeed, Nielsen’s critical work from the mid-1990s onward has effectively recovered many black poets who have received insufficient critical attention, partly because of the “difficulty” of their experiments with language and textuality. In *Black Chant*, Nielsen traces the work and reception of a range of poets, not only revealing the importance of their linguistic experiments and the convergence of those experiments with literary movements in white poetic scenes, but also showing how and why “non-conventional” poets such as Norman Pritchard, Lorenzo Thomas, and the African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman have been largely written out of mainstream literary criticism. In addition, Nielsen argues that even the work of “canonical” poets such as Amiri Baraka is selectively celebrated with a critical gaze that does not often include his more experimental work, or the early work indebted to “white” literary movements such as the Beats.

Linguistic experiment in the African American literary tradition takes many forms; as Nielsen maintains, “As always, it is in the writing itself that we will find our way to a retracing of the motions between black and white, between script and speech, between page and performance.”⁸⁸ In considering poetic experiments with language that straddle oral and print cultures, it is also important to note the generational flow, almost a call and response, among poets following the Black Arts Movement. A hip-hop poet such as Saul Williams is a self-proclaimed “disciple” of Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka, but his work embraces the complex identity construction of the post-Civil Rights generation, rejecting what he considers to be the false boundaries of race, gender, nation. For Williams, like many late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century poets, this work of shape-shifting identity has decidedly to do with genre, with language, and with the visual experience of words arranged on the page:

CURRENTLY
 MOON MARKED
 AND
 SUN SPARKED
 UNMARKED BILLS
 WILL I AM
 CERTAIN
 I SPEAK A NEW LANGUAGE (SAID THE SHOTGUN TO THE HEAD 5).⁸⁹

The deconstructive thrust of the passage with its (un)naming of hip-hop artist will.i.am and assertion of something larger, less individually or culturally specific – something positively *cosmic* – signifies a shift in both form and content, one that draws on old and new worlds in the context of, but not limited to, African American cultures. Such reflexivity recalls the ongoing work of poet Nathaniel Mackey, perhaps the premier practitioner of jazz poetry in the African American literary tradition, who incorporates multiple modes and sources of black expression into a cross-cultural poetic project. Brent Hayes Edwards provides a larger explanation for Mackey’s attention to musical elements, styles, and genres in his poetry. “What is common to black creative expression,” Edwards suggests, “is not necessarily an emphasis on what we have perhaps too easily come to think of as ‘orality,’ but instead an aesthetic imperative to test and break the limits of what can be said.”⁹⁰ This attention to the unsayable, which Edwards identifies as Mackey’s dominant concern, takes linguistic, historical, and cosmological form, seen in the serial poem “Song of the Andoumboulou,” pieces of which are found in works going back to *Eroding Witness* (1985), *School of Udhra* (1993), and *WHATSAID Serif* (1998), and published in their entirety in *Splay Anthem* (2006), for which Mackey was awarded a National Book Award. Edwards describes the visual work of Mackey’s poetry both in terms of his “jagged, ‘visually syncopated line,’” but also in the larger graphic device that “seem[s] both to mark a ‘cut’ in the winding, heavily enjambed descent, and at the same time an announcement of continuance, as the poems seem to take themselves up again – under the line, as it were.”⁹¹ In “Song of the Andoumboulou: 12,” for instance, the poem ends:

Tilted sky, turned earth. Bent wheel, burnt
 we.
 Bound I. Insurbordinate
 us.⁹²

The graphic design of the poem with its lack of formal closure pulls the reader forward to the next “Song” in the cycle; however, this is no linear progression,

as all of the poems in the series may be read intertextually through their cultural allusions, self-referentiality, and evocation of a non-linear time spanning geographies, histories, and worlds. The Andoumboulou in the cosmogony of the Dogon people of Mali are a pre-human species, a failed creation that never was born, and "Song of the Andoumboulou: 12" is rich with imagery of truncated possibility, of lost knowledge systems, of returns from what was thought to be the dead, and of resistance to oppressive cultural systems. The poem begins reflexively with the speaker positioning himself – "Weathered raft I saw myself/adrift on" – and immediately evokes as potential guide through both space and time the lost knowledge system of Namoratunga, stone pillars in what is now Kenya placed in the earth in alignment with stars and constellations as the basis of an early calendrical system. Even as it reclaims and cites this lost epistemology, however, the poem expresses a rueful alienation from cultural expressions vanished in the dislocations of history, time, and cultural dissolution. In this way, the poem offers a cautionary tale about an embrace of authenticity, whether in the form of reclaimed African spirit systems ("Saw myself bled, belatedly/cut, inverted blade/atop Eshu's head"⁹³) or of black music as authentic black expression ("Song so black it/burnt/my lip ... Tore my throat as I/walked up Real Street. Raw beginner,/green/attempt to sing the blues"⁹⁴). In these lines, Mackey registers the dangers of encountering elemental aspects of black identity – the blues song that burns the mouth, the encounter with a trickster god whose tricks are sometimes deadly, even to his diasporic cultural heirs. At poem's end, however, after the encounters with a range of black cultural referents that remind us, as Gates puts it, that "there can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in specific figures,"⁹⁵ the speaker adrift has morphed into an "Insurbordinate/us."⁹⁶ The individual ("I") may still be bound, and the "we," the collective, may quite literally have been burnt, but the "us" that is the progeny, the receiver of knowledges, histories, and cultures, remains "insubordinate" with all the inflections therein: not submissive, refusing authority, playfully resisting. This *disobedience* is characteristic of the linguistic and cultural signification that places Mackey within the black literary postmodernism traced by Gates.

In spite of this common emphasis upon the fractured, elusive nature of historical inheritance, the subject of history nonetheless forms a matter of intense preoccupation for postmodern African American writers. In fact, black literary postmodernism is often distinguished from the wider stream of US postmodern literature on the grounds that it maintains a strong investment in the task of historical recovery. A striking facet of much African American

literature since the 1970s that deals with history is its break from realism and its incorporation of stylistic elements such as textual fragmentation and self-reflexivity. These typically postmodern techniques call attention to the necessarily mediated nature of all efforts of historical reclamation, yet, as literary critic Timothy Spaulding argues, the formal instability of African American literary texts dealing with history is counter-balanced by an abiding commitment to the task of historical reconstruction.⁹⁷ Postmodern black writers return persistently to earlier historical texts and periods, in the process opening up a host of questions about the textual process as well as social implications of the very project of historical recovery.

Perhaps the best example of this sort of paradoxical approach that simultaneously builds up and undermines the status of the historical referent is Colson Whitehead's novel, *John Henry Days* (2001), which explores the nebulous ramifications of a public event commemorating the legendary black steel-driver John Henry. The novel extrapolates from an actual "John Henry Days" festival that took place in West Virginia in 1996, to celebrate the issue of a new US postal stamp honoring John Henry. Whitehead's principal object of critique in the novel is precisely the terms of black integration into meta-narratives of national history in the postmodern period. This process is shown to proceed via commodification, transmuting history into entertainment. The conversion of the past into a "pay-per-view spectacle"⁹⁸ entails an erasure of the nation's painful racial histories. In the novel, the John Henry Days festival is shown to be of vital importance in publicizing the entry of Talcott, West Virginia, into a New South economy, an entry contingent on the elision of the region's ugly racial history. So, the fact of slavery is mentioned "swiftly, usually only in terms of Mr. Lincoln's proclamation, as if the peculiar institution only came to be in its ending."⁹⁹ In face of such erasures, Whitehead does not take the approach of offering a more accurate history, an approach precluded by the fact that there is no "irrefutable proof" of evidence that could establish the truth of John Henry's story.¹⁰⁰ The multiple protagonists of *John Henry Days* are forced into a confrontation with US racial history. However, refracting John Henry's story through numerous texts and perspectives, the novel refuses to supply either a stable historical referent or a clear understanding of the relation between that history and the present.

One reason this relation is so hard to grasp in postmodern African American literature is that the past repeatedly erupts into the present, refusing to stay confined within the realm of history. The first exhibit of George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* is set on what seems to be a futuristic scene of air travel, until we learn that the airplane is called the Celebrity Slaveship and passengers are

asked to fasten shackles instead of seat belts. While crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the plane enters a time warp as it whizzes past fragmented scenes of US history from the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement. This sense of warped time contorts the structure of much postmodern black drama dealing with history. Abandoning linear, progressive plots, dramatists such as Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks employ the techniques of juxtaposition and repetition to create a disorienting impression of temporal stasis and simultaneity. In Kennedy's play *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996), documentary scenes dealing with her son Adam's experience of police brutality in the 1990s are abruptly intercut with sequences about racist violence during the 1940s. Similarly, Parks's "history plays" – *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986–89), *The America Play* (1992–94), and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989–92) – jolt between different time periods, suggesting historical parallels but refusing to yield a totalized historical vision. Marked by interruptions and reiterations, the plots of these plays enact Parks's view that "History is time that won't quit."¹⁰¹ As many critics have noted, Parks's plays often begin with scenes of death that are then compulsively undone and restaged. Parks relies on the technique of "Rep & Rev," or repetition and revision, akin to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s concept of signifying, to enact the "literal incorporation of the past" into the theatrical present.¹⁰²

To Parks, theater is a dynamic medium for dislocating the past from its layers of historical sedimentation and mobilizing it in the present, but this is a process fraught with multiple risks and difficulties. The greatest challenge is the one Colson Whitehead tackles in *John Henry Days*, of how to restage the past without turning it into a pay-per-view spectacle. Parks's *The America Play*, along with Adrienne Kennedy's *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1974), directly confronts the postmodern crisis of historicity, whereby the historical referent is obliterated by a barrage of simulacra, by meta-theatrically presenting history *as* spectacle. *Essex* is set in a screening room in a film studio, at a rehearsal of a play to be performed by a black theatrical troupe the next day. Through the course of the rehearsal, a projectionist screens a discontinuous slide show of images from the life and death of Mark Essex, a black Vietnam war veteran who in 1973 shot six people before he was killed by the police. Parks's *The America Play*, which also restages the death of an actual historical figure in the form of an endlessly repeated rehearsal for a theatrical show, is set in a "great hole" that is "an exact replica of the Great Hole of History."¹⁰³ The original hole of history is a theme park on the East Coast, scene of a procession of simulacra of historical figures such as Marcus Garvey and George Washington. At the replicated hole of history,

audiences pay to watch and participate in the simulated assassination of Founding Father Abraham Lincoln, here impersonated by a black Foundling Father.

The fakery of this spectacle is underscored by references to the impersonator as a “faux-father,”¹⁰⁴ and audience expectations of a historical truth countervailing the spectacle are ventriloquized by the character of Lucy, with her insistent “need tuh know thuh real thing from thuh echo.”¹⁰⁵ Both Kennedy and Parks stoke (only to then dampen) audience expectations of historical realism, through their incorporation of various forms of documentary evidence, including footnotes providing information about Abraham Lincoln, excerpts from books about the transatlantic slave trade, and newspaper clippings. In Parks’s *Imperceptible Mutabilities* the conventions of documentary realism are encapsulated in “the Book,” full of facts and statistics, laws and amendments. An emblem of the official historical record, “the Book” fails to match the memories of Aretha, the protagonist of this part of the play. “We got differin books,”¹⁰⁶ declares Aretha as she urges the bearer of the Book to make a “histironical amendment.”¹⁰⁷

Insofar as it evokes the idea of historical amendment, this phrase suggests a corrective project that would rectify the omissions and distortions of the official historical record. But Kennedy and Parks engage instead in the work of histrionic amendment – a meta-theatrical project designed to displace the positivist truth-claims of historical realism. In Kennedy’s *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, documentary texts and footage are jarringly juxtaposed against dream sequences, producing a hybrid genre of surrealistic documentary. In *Essex*, the meta-theatrical level of action, in which the characters are absorbed in sifting through fragments of information about Mark Essex, establishes the urgency as well as difficulty of the task of historical recovery. The play does not ultimately deliver an authoritative or objective portrait of Essex. As audiences watch the projectionist refocus and replay the same images of Essex at the Director’s changing requests, the play dramatizes the contingent process by which historical truth is made and modified by the framing and reframing of documentary details. Like Kennedy’s *Essex*, the figure of Saartjie Baartman appears as an elusive object of historical representation in Parks’s play *Venus*. Not surprisingly, this play has come under critical fire for its “slippery interpretation of the historical record,”¹⁰⁸ its failure to take on the task of historical reclamation. Parks has said in an interview that her “plays are not the History Channel.”¹⁰⁹ Instead, like Kennedy’s *Essex*, *Venus* is a meta-theatrical play designed to ensnarl its audiences in the difficulties of historical reconstruction.

Kennedy and Parks combat the postmodern crisis of historicity not by way of corrective realism but by probing the nature of historical truths that are available only as simulacra and spectacle. As the phrase “historical amendment” implies, theater can play the unique role of recontextualizing iconic scenes and moments of history, such as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which is divested of its aura of authenticity through its repeated simulation in *The America Play*. Noting Parks’s refusal to offer authoritative counter-representations, Debby Thompson remarks that Parks writes “deconstructive histories,” the only kind possible in a postmodern era.¹¹⁰ The ultimate aim and effect of Parks’s history plays is to neutralize the very distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity: the black Foundling Father’s imitation of Abraham Lincoln is easily dismissed as a fraudulent gesture, but it is just as persuasively seen as a brave effort to reckon with his own dispossession, to claim the “Hole” as his historical “inheritance.”¹¹¹

Postmodern African American poets have also insistently revisited history, locating the Middle Passage as a kind of originary site of the dual experiences of oppression and resistance in African diasporic life. Poets have taken a variety of approaches to this event, several of them echoing Robert Hayden’s modernist poem “Middle Passage” (1966) in poetic reclamations of the Amistad rebellion (1839). Hayden’s influential poem, which Michael S. Harper has compared with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, is divided into three parts with multiple narrative voices, including an unapologetic slave trader in Part II and in Part III the treacherous ship’s navigator of the *Amistad*, spared by the Africans in order to steer the ship back to Africa only to direct the ship toward the USA, where it was seized near New York. While Hayden’s poem exhibits historical realism in its inclusion of quotations from the logs and journals of slave ships, its recreation of historical personae features a modernist irony revealing the paradoxes at the heart of a slave-owning democracy. The poem foregrounds as ironic everything, from the names of the slave ships in the poem’s first line – “Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy” – to the sexual exploits of the Christian captain, who “perishes” with “the comeliest of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins” when the slave quarters catch fire, to the legal arguments advanced in the Supreme Court case in favor of the slaves’ right to freedom: “We find it paradoxical indeed/that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty/are rooted in the labor of your slaves/should suffer the august John Quincy Adams/to speak with so much passion of the right/of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters.”¹¹² Still, in the midst of a poem relying upon modernist irony and fragmentation of voice, Hayden delivers a historically grounded lament in the form of the refrain upon which the poem

begins and ends: "Voyage through death/to life upon these shores." The unidentified poetic voice which renders this refrain also appears in the penultimate stanza, just after a long passage based upon reportage from the ship's navigator that ends with his vow to return with the slaves to Cuba, where "justice" would surely be done. Contrary to the vengeful desire of the ship's navigator, who envisions this justice enacted through the execution of Joseph Cinque, leader of the Amistad rebellion, this speaker renders Cinque a humanistic hero who figures the deepest, most noble longing of humanity itself: "The deep immortal human wish/the timeless will:/Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,/life that transfigures many lives."¹¹³ Importantly, the substance of the "noble" longing figured by Cinque is left unnamed, and readers learn nothing more about this "deep immortal" human desire than that it may, perhaps, signal the will to live evoked in the final refrain.

The indeterminacy of Hayden's closing lines characterizes postmodern poems taking up this subject, which are often concerned self-reflexively with the possibilities and limits of the representational act itself. Clarence Major's "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage" is interested as much in the history of representational possibilities for those contained within the contours of the black Atlantic – including Europeans and European Americans – as it is in the act of reclaiming the Middle Passage as meaningful site of recollection or memorial within the African American experience. The poem's narrator, Mfu, is the spirit of a slave who "jumped ship" during the Middle Passage, and his position shifts over the course of the poem away from the initial neutrality of an observer seeking understanding: "I am Mfu/not a bit romantic"; "Mfu looks generously in all directions/for understanding of the white/men/who came to the shores/of his nation."¹¹⁴ Mfu tries to locate meaning in the "muck" of the slave trade, attributing responsibility to those in his own village who sold him "for a stupid shaving brush,"¹¹⁵ or finding a resistance to normative racism in the example of a "good white monk."¹¹⁶ As the poem proceeds, however, Mfu's reflective narration brings him only to the understanding of the inherent slippage in moral and representational ground when it comes to histories of race and slavery. Evoking images of blackness from historical texts, classical paintings, cartoons, religious iconography, and racist paraphernalia (such as the toy "like those that French children play with/where a black Martinican maid/complete with apron and head-/piece, springs up with a jolly smile,/ready to dust"¹¹⁷), Mfu contemplates even the act of Emancipation through the lens of its representations, most notably in the Abolitionist Seal that, as Linda Ferguson Selzer points out, became almost a fashion statement signifying nothing more substantial than a belated

noblesse oblige. Thus, even the “deep immortal” human longing for *freedom* – a glorious step beyond simply the desire for survival, for *life*, signified by Cinque in Hayden’s poem – is rendered a banal image, and this image too is canceled in the poem by an anti-abolitionist cartoon showing the roles of slave and slavemaster reversed, a cautionary tale for whites during the political struggles preceding the Emancipation Proclamation.

In a typically postmodern rejection of false notions of objectivity, by poem’s end Mfu has abandoned his neutral stance and turns for a sign of meaning, if not transcendence, to the act of art itself, reclaimed from another diasporic ancestor, Olaudah Equiano, whom he recalls having said, “We are almost/a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.”¹¹⁸ In a long roll call, then, Mfu celebrates and “calls on all of his people of the diaspora,” naming artists and public figures from Frederick Douglass to Oprah.¹¹⁹ Echoing the postmodern consciousness of the effects of commodification on the production of art, however, Mfu’s revolutionary call to action finally devolves into the coopted language of the advertisement and the motivational speech: “You can do more than Jackie Robinson/did for Wheaties, or Joe Louis/did for Chesterfield/Mfu says come on ya’ll.”¹²⁰

Similarly reflecting upon the exploitation of heroic historical figures in a commodified culture, Elizabeth Alexander devotes the final section of the collection *American Sublime* (2005) to the Amistad event, narrating the story of the journey from just after the rebellion through the trip back to the USA, the trial, and the eventual verdict and return of Cinque and others to Sierra Leone. Alexander’s sequence presents the first-person voices of many protagonists, from the Yale professor who sought out a Mende speaker to translate the Amistad captives’ testimonies in court, to James Covey, the translator himself, to the local children who watch the Africans as a spectacle, to the Amistad Africans themselves. Reflecting upon the problems of translation marking the event at the time, as well as the difficulty of creating poetic utterance to render it from a historical distance, the sequence builds to a kind of climax in two poems written in Cinque’s voice, “Waiting for Cinque to Speak” and “Cinque Redux.” In spite of its title, the first Cinque poem is in fact delivered in Cinque’s voice as a testimonial to the actual circumstances of his life in Africa, his capture to settle a debt, and the collective energy that produced – “out of the Babel of Wolof and Kisse” – the Amistad rebellion; however, the second, “Cinque Redux,” presents a first-person voice similar to Clarence Major’s Mfu in its ghostly retrospective upon history. This Cinque looks out over time and contemplates the rendering of his name and image: “I will be called bad motherfucker./I will be venerated./I will be misremembered.”¹²¹

And, like Mfu, this Cinque also looks forward in a kind of postmodern historiographic prophecy “to the future, which I see/unfurling like the strangest dream.”¹²² Not incidentally, the two poems are separated by “The *Amistad Trail*,” a blues poem about the bus tour of historical sites relevant to the Amistad event that notes the “interest” in the tale of the Amistad but also the wound at its heart: “The verse will not resolve./The blues that do not end.”¹²³ Aware of the dangers of commodified history, Alexander’s poetic cycle reclaims the historic event of the Amistad rebellion by recreating the first-person voices of its protagonists in utterances that also inscribe their own limitations.

In the genre of the novel, postmodern writers are revisiting significant points and arcs of African American history by critically rewriting paradigmatic narrative forms, in particular slave narratives and narratives of migration. While African American literature originated in the genre of the fugitive slave narrative, the shift from historical and autobiographical narrative to fictionalized texts resulted in a momentary quiet with regard to the historical experience of slavery. Instead, for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, novels that treated slavery concentrated on its legacies, rather than narrating the actual experience from either the first- or third-person perspective.

The expansion of the historical archive of slavery during the 1960s inspired the literary production of realist historical novels of slavery that drew on oral tradition as a way of recovering the subjective experience of slaves as noted in Chapter 14. This return to the historical moment of slavery was inaugurated by Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1966), a literary adaptation of her grandmother’s oral tales of slavery. The period from the 1970s onward has seen several major reclamations of the slave narrative told in the first- or third-person voice from the point of view of the slave himself or herself: Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* (1979), about Thomas Jefferson’s longtime slave mistress, with whom he had several children, and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), with perhaps the most famous being Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976). Broadcast in two outstandingly popular television mini-series, Haley’s novel was largely responsible for creating a new consciousness in mainstream America of the slave past from the perspective of the enslaved. Based on Haley’s genealogical investigation of seven generations of his own family, *Roots* played a vital role in the process of national reconciliation following the racial upheavals of the 1960s. The dual temporality of *Roots* gratified the demands of both black cultural nationalism and American patriotism: Haley’s journey of genealogical

recovery fed black pride by affirming African origins for contemporary black identity, while the 'up from slavery' narrative culminating in the spectacular individual success of Alex Haley, a descendant of slaves, attested to the fulfilled promise of the American Dream.

In counterpoint to novels such as *Jubilee*, *Roots*, or *Dessa Rose*, which offer a progressive and redemptive vision of the history of slavery, most neo-slave narratives experiment with narrative form and voice to explore the ongoing legacy of slavery well into the twentieth century. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which recounts the story of escaped slave Margaret Garner, is arguably the most critically acclaimed of this category of neo-slave narrative, and is known for its employment of postmodern techniques such as fragmentation of linear time in the piecing together of traumatic memory – what Morrison's characters call "rememory." The novel's formal concern with temporality is a striking manifestation of the specifically African American expression of postmodernism. The rejection of linear, chronological temporal schemes is also a central trope of literature dealing with trauma, in that the very definition of trauma is an inability to distinguish present time from the time of the traumatic wound, and a recurrence of the wound itself through flashback, hypervigilant arousal, nightmare, behavior pattern, or the repetitive need to testify. In a specifically African American context, the locus of trauma reaches back to the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade and the very emergence of a coherent identity marked *African American*. This is the past that demands revisiting in order for the kind of healing that might interrupt the continual reversion to the point of the original trauma.

Other novels that demonstrate this particular approach to time and trauma are Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler (1947–2006). Both novels lay bare the long-suppressed story of rape and miscegenation in plantation society, an event obsessively revisited in the oral storytelling of the *Corregidora* women. This oral tradition rectifies the omissions of the official historical record, which was purposefully destroyed at the end of slavery, but the recursive structure of the novel also clarifies the traumatic nature of the ancestral imperative to continue testifying to a brutal history. While Jones adapts the blues structure of repetition-with-variation to reveal the disquieting simultaneity of past and present, Butler's *Kindred* employs the device of time travel to draw parallels between forced miscegenation during antebellum slavery and the patriarchal power dynamics of interracial sexual relationships in the 1970s present. Asserting such continuities between past and present, Butler and Jones challenge prevalent meta-narratives of US racial history as a progressive movement culminating in the Civil Rights Movement.

Octavia Butler's use of the time-travel device marks *Kindred* as an example of the "postmodern slave narrative," defined by Timothy Spaulding as that proliferating sub-genre of late twentieth-century novels of slavery that violate the conventions of narrative realism. Documentary realism was a required component of the antebellum fugitive slave narratives; relaying the unvarnished truth of slavery was crucial to their political goal (of pressing the case for abolition). But as Toni Morrison has remarked in her essay "The Site of Memory," late twentieth-century writers revisiting slavery are necessarily engaged in a different enterprise than were the authors of fugitive slave narratives,¹²⁴ and their critical approach to realism conspicuously marks this difference. As Spaulding notes, the break from realism in recent narratives of slavery disrupts governing protocols of historical representation, in particular calling into question the positivist truth-claims of modern historiography.¹²⁵

A critique of the discipline of history is central to a wide range of late twentieth-century fictions of slavery, even those that initially appear to be straightforwardly realist, such as David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) and Edward Jones's *The Known World* (2003). John Washington, the protagonist of Bradley's novel, is a professional historian trying to find out the cause of his father's suicide, an investigation that leads him to the horrific story of a group of runaway slaves who committed mass suicide when threatened with capture. Before he can reconstruct this story, John has to recognize the limits of the historical method in which he has been trained: he begins to see modern historiography as "antediluvian" in that it is still mired in the positivist principles of seventeenth-century science (such as mechanistic laws of cause and effect or the presumption of neutral and objective knowledge), principles that have long been modified, if not superseded, in the study of the natural sciences.¹²⁶ Only after suspending these principles and summoning instead the powers of the literary imagination does John begin to grasp the worldview of the runaway slaves – a worldview in which death signifies not the end of life but a passage into a different dimension of reality. Once John opens his imagination to this conception of death, he is able to hear and feel the lingering presence of the slaves who killed themselves over a century earlier. Stretching the conventions of narrative realism, this scene brings the past to life in an entirely different – more immediate and affective – manner than does the practice of writing history. It is only fitting, then, that the novel ends with John setting fire to the tools of his trade as a historian.

A comparable (although more covert) critique of historiography can be found in Edward Jones's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Known World*, which at first glance appears to be the very epitome of realist fiction. This

disquieting novel, about the rare incidence of slave-owning free blacks in the antebellum South, accrues its realism by incorporating numerous pseudo-historical passages and allusions. But the reality effect of Jones's narrative is often ruffled by the intrusion of unexplained supernatural phenomena (such as narration from the point of view of characters after they have died) and flash-forwards that inform readers about events to occur decades beyond the narrative present. Disrupting linear chronology and mimetic illusion, these devices configure the era of slavery as a past that is not quite past (and as such not yet a matter of history). What's more, investing omniscience in the narrator of fiction rather than in any of the historian figures who appear in the novel, *The Known World* suggests that the novel is a more capacious and capable medium for rendering the truth of slavery – or, as John Washington in *The Chaneyville Incident* puts it, the historian is but a “frustrated novelist.”¹²⁷

In a similar vein, the narrator of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) asks, “Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?,”¹²⁸ going on to declare that Edgar Allan Poe “says more in a few stories than all of the volumes by historians.”¹²⁹ Reed's novel, along with Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), is best characterized as “historiographic metafiction,” Linda Hutcheon's well-known term for postmodern novels concerned with history. Such novels remain seriously invested in the matter of historical truth, precisely through their playful parody of established forms of historical representation.¹³⁰ In keeping with Hutcheon's definition, Reed and Johnson employ parody to expose the unreliability of the official historical record of slavery. *Flight to Canada* is full of anachronisms (for instance, President Abraham Lincoln's assassination being shown on television or a fugitive slave escaping to freedom on a jumbo jet) that not only subvert the realist representational norms of historical fiction but also reveal unexpected correspondences between slavery and the present.

Historiographic metafiction is clearly indebted to the 1960s revisionist historiography of slavery, in particular its revaluation of disciplinary standards of evidence. Ironically, not long after the nineteenth-century slave narratives were admitted into the historical archive, meta-fictional novelists of slavery began to highlight the constraining features of the genre as seen from a late twentieth-century perspective. In *Flight to Canada*, Reed shows how easily the slave's story could be appropriated and manipulated by abolitionists, through his merciless portrait of Harriet Beecher Stowe stealing Josiah Henson's narrative and misrepresenting it in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson goes even further in questioning the authenticity of the clause “as written by him (or her) self,” that was appended to the titles of so many

antebellum slave narratives. A speculative inquiry into the nature of freedom, Johnson's neo-slave narrative contains a self-reflexive chapter titled "The Manumission of First-Person Viewpoint." Here, an omniscient narrator interrupts the first-person voice of the fugitive slave Andrew Hawkins to reflect upon what is arguably the "only invariant feature" of the antebellum slave narrative, its use of first-person voice. The narrator points out that the convention that supposedly lends authenticity to the slave narrative as a historical document might well be its greatest constraint: "What we value most highly in this viewpoint are precisely the *limitations* imposed upon the narrator-perceiver, who cannot, for example, know what transpires in another mind ... or in a scene that excludes him; what we lack in authority, we gain in immediacy: a premise (or prejudice) of Positivist Science."¹³¹

This quote is immediately followed by the assertion that "the Age of Reason overlaps the age of slavery,"¹³² closely echoed by Toni Morrison's observation that the "Age of Enlightenment" during which the slave narratives were written was also the "Age of Scientific Racism."¹³³ Revisiting the era of slavery allows postmodern black writers to lay bare the dark underside of the Age of Reason, to reveal racial terror to be a constitutive element of Enlightenment modernity. The authors of antebellum slave narratives displayed their possession of the faculty of reason in order to demonstrate not only their fitness for freedom and citizenship but also their very access to the category of "human." Whereas Frederick Douglass found it necessary to discredit a fellow slave's belief in root-work (or conjuring) as "ignorant" superstition,¹³⁴ postmodern novelists of slavery flagrantly flout the dictates of rationality as part of their critique of the racial logic of modern humanism. From Ishmael Reed's neo-hoodoo aesthetic to the possession of modern characters by ancestral ghosts from slavery, supernatural elements in postmodern neo-slave narratives evoke Afro-diasporic ways of knowing that were suppressed by Enlightenment rationality and in this sense contribute to what Paul Gilroy has famously termed a "black counterculture of modernity."¹³⁵

Reconsidering the era of slavery from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, African American writers critically reevaluate the promise of modern humanism that inspired the authors of the antebellum fugitive slave narratives. Along with the faculty of reason, print literacy was a crucial means of gaining access to fully human status as well as to the modern political rights inhering in this status. But while literacy served as a gateway to freedom for fugitive slave authors such as Frederick Douglass, it plays a far more ambiguous role in postmodern narratives. Contemporary African American writers bring a particular historical inflection to the suspicion of writing found in

much postmodern literature, by invoking the pernicious ways in which writing was used to enslave or to justify enslavement – through auction announcements, bills of sale, fugitive slave notices, and the pseudo-scientific treatises on the subhuman nature of peoples of African descent. This last is perhaps most powerfully exhibited in Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the ex-slave Sethe laments her complicity with Schoolteacher, the craven slave-driver who engaged in academic exercises such as the categorization of slaves' characteristics into "human" and "animal." Sethe's sense of her forced participation is based upon the fact that one of her tasks on the plantation was to make the ink that Schoolteacher used to record his pseudo-scientific observations. Morrison's staging of the scene where writing is used quite literally to break the spirit of an enslaved person, along with her agonized awareness of her own collusion in the act of writing, provides a paradigmatic example of a historically specific and explicitly black postmodern suspicion of textuality.

The postmodern distrust of writing pertains not only to the level of language as such (in a deconstructive sense), but also to master narratives able to supply stable and authoritative meanings. From an African American perspective, the *master* in master narrative, of course, signifies doubly: as a hegemonic official account, and as the figure of the master under slavery and beyond. In his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass describes how he illicitly acquired literacy by writing between the lines of his young master's textbook, a scene of writing that metaphorically captures the ways in which the fugitive slave narratives were bound up in the texts of their masters. Featuring various kinds of masters' texts, including history books, wills, and captains' logs from slave ships, postmodern neo-slave narratives evince a deep ambivalence about the emancipatory potential of print literacy.

While some neo-slave narratives, such as Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Reed's *Flight to Canada*, affirm the limited avenues to freedom that are opened up when the formerly enslaved seize and rewrite the master's texts, Toni Morrison presents the oral traditions of the enslaved as more authentic vehicles of psychological liberation from slavery. In *Beloved*, the dehumanizing master-text of Schoolteacher's notebook is countered by the oral and performance traditions of song, sermon, and dance. The most powerful example is Baby Suggs's sermon exhorting the ex-slaves to laugh, cry, dance, and learn how to love every part of their abused bodies. The redemptive potential of this performance is renewed in the climactic scene toward the end of the novel when a group of singing women surround Sethe and prevent her from repeating the past. The women's singing is described as pure sound that goes beyond language – a non-discursive medium of expression that

instantiates Paul Gilroy's concept of the "slave sublime."¹³⁶ In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy distinguishes between two kinds of Afro-diasporic politics: the politics of fulfillment, a discursive and rational mode that seeks to actualize the ideals of Enlightenment modernity, and the politics of transfiguration, a counter-modern mode that eschews language as a medium for communicating its "unsayable claims to truth."¹³⁷ Using the term "slave sublime" to describe the linguistically unrepresentable desires that drive the politics of transfiguration, Gilroy contends that this politics is best exemplified by Afro-diasporic performance and oral traditions.¹³⁸ Following Gilroy's framework, much African American literature, from the fugitive slave narratives through the Harlem Renaissance and up to a 1950s text such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, pursues some variant of a politics of fulfillment, with its demand that US democratic ideals be realized in practice. Postmodern black writers often deploy a politics of transfiguration in order to register their critical disaffiliation from the project of modernity, which paradoxically seems to be at once exhausted and incompletely realized in the post-Civil Rights decades. While *Beloved* perhaps represents the quintessential example, nearly all postmodern novels of slavery exhibit the counter-modern impulse characteristic of Gilroy's politics of transfiguration. Insistently rewriting the antebellum slave narratives, postmodern black writers loop back to the origins of the African American literary tradition in order to reevaluate the promise of modernity that has so forcefully impelled this tradition.

As part of this project of revaluation, contemporary black writers are revisiting not only the slave narrative but also the migration narrative, the other paradigmatic genre of the African American literary tradition that tests the promise of modernity. The migration narrative can encompass anything from the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, through the flight of the fugitive slave, to the multiple movements of people of African descent from 1865 onward. Indeed, the exhibit *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience* presented by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture counts a minimum of thirteen major migrations of people of African descent within the Black Atlantic (made up of the three prongs of the transatlantic slave trade: Europe, Africa, and the Americas). In US-based black literature, the central migration narrative deals with the journey from South to North, first as a means of escape from slavery, and then from the South to newly industrial urban centers in the North. Scholars identify the period of the Great Migration as 1916–30 and locate its impetus in the demand for industrial labor prompted by the First World War; however, the migration of the African American people from the South to the North, West, and Midwest continued

through most of the twentieth century, with reverse migrations from all those locations to the South in more recent years.

One of the central themes of the African American migration narrative centered in the USA is the sense of hope and then disillusionment directed at the cities of the North. The classic type of urban migration narrative can be characterized as the narrative of ascent, to use a term popularized by Robert Stepto, in which a protagonist's quest for upward mobility leads from the rural South to the urban North and entails mastery of print literacy and often alienation from folk communal traditions. Perhaps the paradigmatic instance of this kind of narrative is Richard Wright's autobiographical text *Black Boy* (1945), which charts a linear and progressive trajectory from racial oppression in the rural South to Wright's self-possession via print literacy in the urban North. Some postmodern novels, such as Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999), rework this classic form of the migration narrative, in the process measuring the cultural costs as well as the progressive possibilities of urban modernity for African American people. But as Farah Griffin has noted, African American migration narratives in the post-Civil Rights decades more often offer a reversal of the traditional journey up from the South.¹³⁹ So, for instance, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) engages the reader in a fictive retracing of steps and searching for lost ancestry as protagonist Milkman Dead journeys South to recall his familial roots, and a subplot of her novel *Tar Baby* (1982), much like Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1989), explores the journeying of main characters between what is couched as modern urbanity and a somewhat anachronistic Southern rural space. In these reverse narratives of immersion (to use Robert Stepto's term), the rural South is generally presented as the locus of ancestry and community as well as of distinctively black (folk) cultural traditions.

Postmodern variations on the immersion narrative foreground various aspects of language and text as signs of the search for ancestry and cultural identity. For example, in *Song of Solomon* Morrison explores the notion of oral literacy as Milkman's *Bildungsroman* journey South from Michigan is only fulfilled upon his discovery of a lost rhyme chronicling his family legacy in rural Virginia. As Nina Mikkelsen notes, in addition to including actual songs, rhymes, and other bits of oral culture (as "content"), Morrison uses a "fractal" style in her narrative form that has its source in oral cultures: "The contrapuntal style of storytelling Morrison uses reflects the fractal design (many voices or many ways of seeing versus one character as the central consciousness)."¹⁴⁰ As Mikkelsen points out, the positioning of oral techniques in written text requires more than an insertion of the oral element, but rather

entails structural changes in voice, point of view, and narrative time. In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison identifies certain elements – such as use of a choric narrative voice or synthesis of supernatural and mundane dimensions of reality – that align her fiction with black oral culture.¹⁴¹ These elements can also be found in other novels of immersion such as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, which breaks with realist conventions by moving among various narrative voices, including the first-person narration of a character who has already died and a choric first-person voice (a "we") that is not identified with any specific character in the novel. Like *Song of Solomon*, *Mama Day* further oralizes the form of the novel by seamlessly blending mythical, magical, and mundane registers of reality.

Perhaps the one convention of the migration narrative (whether ascent or immersion) that is most relentlessly interrogated in late twentieth-century African American fiction is its symbolic geography of rural South as a site of communal belonging and urban North as a scene of deracinated alienation. Such distinctions are utterly confounded in Leon Forrest's epic novel *Divine Days* (1992), which is set in Forest County, Illinois, an imagined urban locale (inspired by Chicago) that is permeated by myths and memories of Forrest County, Mississippi. The bars and barbershops, churches and street corners of Forrest's fictive city are communal spaces of cultural transmission and reinvention, while the remembered South of the novel is the scene of miscegenation, orphanage, and racial illegitimacy. If *Divine Days* offers the most richly textured portrayal of Northern urban culture to be found in recent African American fiction, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) achieves something similar with the rural South. This experimental novel is framed by two vignettes that register the passing of the folkways of the Old South in a choric, anonymous narrative voice that uneasily intermixes elegy and irony. The narrative voice enjoins an unspecified "you" to remember the organic community that is fast being eroded by industrialization and cultural standardization, but this call to remembrance is counterbalanced by a clear-sighted admission of the limits of organic notions of community. The novel shares much in common with the Southern folk aesthetic of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* or Naylor's *Mama Day*, including a fractal structure that shifts discontinuously among various narrative perspectives and the intrusion of ghostly spirits into the register of mundane reality. But whereas magic in the rural South of *Song of Solomon* and *Mama Day* evokes a distinctively black system of folk belief, the sorcery in Kenan's novel derives from multiple and unexpected cultural sources, as is apparent even from the two epigraphs concerning ghosts and demons, taken from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas*

Carol and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Whereas the visiting spirits in narratives of immersion are typically ancestors seeking connection, the necromancy in Kenan's novel reflects the psychological derangement of a queer adolescent boy who cannot reconcile his sexuality with the repressive Christian theology of his ancestors. Although the rural North Carolina setting of the novel is steeped in rich ancestral lore, it is also depicted as a site of extreme alienation for Horace Cross, given that his family and community equate homosexuality with racial betrayal.

Postmodern African American novelists are reexamining conventional standards of authentic black culture not only by remapping the symbolic geography of classic migration narratives but also by exploring multiple migratory streams that deviate from the patterns of movement between rural South and urban North found in ascent and immersion narratives. In *Paradise* (1997), for example, Morrison traces the westward migration of African Americans, a movement largely neglected in histories of black migration. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison links the Southern oral culture she advanced as crucial to modern black identity in *Song of Solomon* to the oral culture and history of the Caribbean, dating to the time of slavery and resistance in the form of maroon revolts. This link is made explicit through the character of Son, who hails from the Southern USA and eventually embraces the resistant heritage embodied in the oral tale of the invisible horsemen, men who resisted plantation slavery in the past and exploitative tourist development in the present. Son's character is juxtaposed with that of Jadine, in *Tar Baby*, whose multiple travel itineraries (ranging across Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States) chart the formation of a cosmopolitan, racially hybridized identity. In this novel, Morrison's attention expands to a postcolonial view of racist-capitalist exploitation that includes the internal colonization of African American peoples as well as the colonization of Africa and the Caribbean by European powers.

Critical attention to diasporic connections among black peoples in Europe, Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean has intensified since the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* in 1993, although such connections have remained unbroken since the onset of the triangular trade in human beings in the sixteenth century. For Gilroy, the concept of diaspora captures the necessarily hybrid quality of modern black identity and culture, dispelling the essentialist notions of race that Gilroy aligns with nationalism. Some contemporary literary texts lend force to Gilroy's analysis, with their exploration of the complexities of racial identity formation that accrue to diasporic travel. For example, in the work of St. Kitts-born writer Caryl Phillips, which

includes travelogues such as *The European Tribe* (1987) and *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) along with several novels, diasporic journeys spanning various points of the Black Atlantic invariably complicate the processes of racial identification and national belonging. In his most celebrated novels, *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1994), Phillips traces what Gilroy calls the “fractal” structure of Black Atlantic culture¹⁴² by juxtaposing disparate sites and time periods within disjointed narrative forms that elude synthesis. The fictional travel narratives of Reginald McKnight’s *I Get on the Bus* (1990) and *He Sleeps* (2001) similarly dramatize the decentering of racial identity in the course of diasporic travel. As critic Rolland Murray shows, McKnight’s novels parody the return narrative in which journeying to Africa ultimately delivers cultural and genealogical origins to deracinated diasporic subjects. With their disorienting mixture of dream, hallucination, and reality, McKnight’s novels thwart their protagonists’ quests for racial authenticity, instead highlighting the “ontological uncertainty” afflicting the postmodern black subject.¹⁴³

As deeply influential as Gilroy’s model of Black Atlantic culture has been, it has also been criticized for its overemphasis on the deessentializing impetus of diaspora culture and its elision of the gender dimensions of diasporic identities and cultural formations. In her essay “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” Yogita Goyal identifies two distinct generic strains for representing diaspora in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*: the mythic mode aligned with the character of Son affirms the trans-geographical coherence of Black Diaspora culture, whereas the realist register of Jadine’s narrative conveys the conflicts and misrecognitions attending diasporic encounters. What’s more, the “diaspora mothers”¹⁴⁴ associated with the mythicized narrative of Son perpetuate essentialist ideals of black womanhood and as such are deeply threatening to Jadine’s cosmopolitan understanding of her identity.¹⁴⁵ At the very least, Morrison’s novel suggests that diasporic identifications are not intrinsically hybridizing but in certain contexts can serve to shore up both gender essentialism and racial purity.

Morrison’s *Tar Baby* and the novels of Caryl Phillips and Reginald McKnight, among others, form a valuable archive for emergent critical approaches linking postcolonial and African American Studies. Critics such as John Cullen Gruesser in his recent book *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (2005) make cogent arguments for the sharing of theoretical insights between the two well-established fields. Such sharing – not meant to be a blurring or conflating – constitutes a positive development for African American literary studies, opening the way for multifaceted accounts of racial identity and culture in the US and global context. Two experimental

postmodern works – *The Alexander Plays* (1992) by Adrienne Kennedy and John Edgar Wideman's novel *Fanon* – exemplify this effort to reckon with the transnational dimensions of black culture and politics. Both works teem with heterogeneous cultural citations and intratexts. Over the course of the Alexander quartet, the protagonist Suzanne repurposes Bette Davis films, Napoleon's love letters to Josephine, and Léopold Senghor's love poetry to make sense of her own cultural identity. In Wideman's novel, Jean-Luc Godard is challenged to make a film about Frantz Fanon by the surrogate author Thomas who, like Wideman himself, is writing a deliberately anachronistic and genre-bending book about Fanon. The novel traces the multiple directions of Fanon's travels, which fail to follow any recognizable diasporic trajectory. Just as the fictional Fanon moves from Martinique to Dominica to France to Algeria to Maryland, Kennedy's Suzanne Alexander moves across various actual and imaginary geographical settings, including postindependence Ghana, a university campus in Ohio, London, Washington, DC, Thomas Hardy's Wessex, and Beethoven's Vienna. Extended quotes from Fanon's two best-known books, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, are scattered throughout Kennedy's and Wideman's works.

Kennedy and Wideman in *The Alexander Plays* and *Fanon*, respectively, invoke Fanon as a guide to understanding the ramifications of race in a diasporic context, an effort that demands attention to colonialism as much as to slavery. In this respect, both works pose provocative questions for the Black Atlantic framework theorized by Gilroy, who overlooks the history of colonialism in his exclusive focus on slavery as the adhesive element of black diasporic culture and politics. In addition to its cohesive force, the memory of slavery in Gilroy's account also inspires the redemptive possibilities of Black Atlantic culture. Such possibilities hover just beyond the reach of Wideman's Thomas, who explicitly resignifies an earlier short story (written and published by the actual author Wideman), "Damballah," dealing with an enslaved boy who honored the memory of a murdered fellow slave by giving his severed head a water burial. Thomas remembers that while writing the short story, "he'd found it easy to identify with the slave boy" who had "caught a glimpse of freedom" in the recalcitrant ways of the murdered slave. But what the scene in the novel emphasizes is the dissonance between the author of "Damballah," who was "intoxicated with possibility," and the author of the Fanon book (Wideman as well as Thomas) who finds it much harder to write a "useful fiction" of slavery.¹⁴⁶ The figure of Fanon helps both Wideman and Kennedy to take account of the shifting career of race over the second half of the twentieth century.

In the first play of Kennedy's Alexander quartet, "She Talks to Beethoven," set in Accra in 1961, a voice on the radio reads Fanon's famous passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* about the "crushing objecthood" of the black subject (whether slave or colonized native) transfixed by the white gaze¹⁴⁷ – a condition parallel to the double-consciousness articulated by Du Bois half a century earlier than Fanon. This is also the condition diagnosed by Charles Johnson as the "wound" of dualism inflicted by slavery, which Johnson, echoing Fanon, indicts for the fact that it "epidermalized Being."¹⁴⁸ Adrienne Kennedy returns insistently to the metaphor of the racial "wound," but its referent ramifies over the course of the quartet, including slavery and lynching in the US context as well as the torture of political prisoners in the context of French colonialism in Algeria. The variable meanings of the racial wound are made visible on the very body of Suzanne Alexander, who has suffered the trauma of a hate crime in Columbus, Ohio in the past and who in the present time setting of the play begins to take on the symptoms of the psychiatric disorders suffered by Fanon's patients in Algeria. In Wideman's novel as well, the figure of Fanon signifies multiply, illuminating both the racial psychopathology that lingers as an inheritance of slavery and its permutations in the twenty-first century. At the outset of the novel, Wideman explains that he turned to Fanon because the "plague of race continues to blight people's lives, becoming more virulent as it mutates and spreads across the globe."¹⁴⁹ Wideman invokes the Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth*, the Fanon who so starkly clarified the ways in which racial division "stultifies the being."¹⁵⁰ The "Manichean" racial logic theorized by Fanon returns with a vengeance in the twenty-first-century time setting of the novel, fueling the global war against terrorism. As television news nightly draws "clearly demarcated" "bright yellow lines" between right and wrong, American and foreign, West and East, Fanon's work with "Arab victims" of torture becomes newly resonant in the post-9/11 world.¹⁵¹

The problem of the color line persists in the imagined worlds of Wideman and Kennedy, although it does not exclusively take the black-white form of Du Boisean double-consciousness. The great difficulty of *Fanon* and *The Alexander Plays* in fact arises from their aesthetic struggle to withstand the still powerful pull of racial division. This struggle is manifested in the various formal transgressions through which Kennedy and Wideman attempt to blur the bright yellow lines of spatial, historical, racial, cultural, and genre demarcation. Beethoven visits postindependence Ghana to console Suzanne Alexander and a fictive Wideman takes Jean-Luc Godard on a guided tour of the Homewood ghetto in Pittsburgh. Wideman resorts to cinematic

devices of transition such as the fade or the dissolve to connect apparently disparate sites and instances of racial oppression such as his brother incarcerated in a US prison and the Arab political prisoners in Fanon's Algeria as well as the twenty-first-century war on terror. The Alexander quartet stages a theater of volatile identifications, as Suzanne simultaneously relives and displaces her psychic disorder through her enactment of Lucy's role in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or her reading of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Even as the experimental form of the Alexander plays and Wideman's novel opens up new future directions for postmodern black writing, these works continue to reverberate with the founding purpose of African American literature. "I want to be free," says the narrator of Wideman's novel, echoing the narrators of antebellum fugitive slave narratives, as he recalls Frantz Fanon's struggle to "liberate [him]self from the shackles of race to become truly human."¹⁵²

Acknowledging the role of self-determination at the core of the ongoing African American literary project, postmodern writers bring a wary eye to the commodification of their art in a global context, particularly in the post-millennial age of triumphant global capitalism. The long poem "About the Author" at the center of Paul Beatty's *Joker Joker Deuce* performs this suspicion in an extended meditation upon the complicity of black cultural figures like Spike Lee and even heroes such as Martin Luther King in the commodification of their images; as Beatty writes about King: "heroes fall down and go boom."¹⁵³ The poem chronicles a young poet who comes to consciousness of the potential cooptation of black cultural production for corporate profit when he spies a newspaper horoscope that reads "mars is in the house/and niggas like us/are on the cusp of being in vogue/we bout to get over."¹⁵⁴ Watching Lee's first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, the poet wonders if this is the change he's been looking for, the revolution "in the tradition of/jomo kenyatta or sugar ray whippin jake lamotta,"¹⁵⁵ and indeed it feels just that way until he watches the film with "kiphanie lynn tia and nik," who hip the speaker to the film's misogyny. At this gendered disruption of the masculinist revolutionary scene, the poem shifts to survey the constraints on the insurgent possibility of black culture, particularly its commercialization.

In spite of these dangers, well acknowledged and explored in the post-modern artistic tradition, African American writers currently take up a good share of the global market for everything from popular to literary fiction, drama, and poetry, not to mention garnering substantial formal recognition. Surely this access to broad readerships bodes well in the new millennium, with its possibilities for confronting histories of racism and

for harvesting the long histories of creolization so as to fully cultivate Reginald McKnight's ideal of "polyconscious" African American identities and literatures.

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PART III

★

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AS ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL
CAPITAL

Children's and young adult literatures

GISELLE LIZA ANATOL

Like African American literature more generally, African American children's literature emerged in response to a number of needs within the American cultural and political context. This chapter examines what those needs were, how they have been met, and to what extent they have changed. This chapter is included in the book first and foremost because of the history that African American children's literature shares with African American literature: (1) recognizing and desiring to address the striking absence or the persistent stereotypes of people of African descent in mainstream literature (works such as Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales, Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* [1899], Laura Lee Hope's Bobbsey Twins series,¹ and Hugh Lofting's *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* [1922] provide a few cogent examples); (2) the longstanding "ghettoized" experience of the body of work itself within and without the larger field of canonical literature. Many African American writers – among them Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison – have traversed the boundary between "adult" and "children's" writing, allowing readers to see their most salient ideas and artistry in a variety of contexts. Finally, African American children's literature not only has evolved in its own right, but also has redefined a major component of what is today the largest single industry in the world, publishing and entertainment.

What concerns us in this chapter is the extent to which children's literature – in the categories of both picture books and young adult (YA) literature – can inform our understanding of the development of African American literature. In many ways, the activism in the area of children's literature has been far more extensive than in African American literature as a whole. This is based on the belief that the deployment of an anti-racist agenda is far more critical at developmental stages if we are to affect any kind of social change. Because children's literature reaches the youngest audiences before institutionalized systems of education have taken their full effect, the "battle for the mind" of

a potential reader becomes a primary target. This is universally viewed as an important ongoing goal of African American children's literature. Thus, books call to a specifically black reading audience – those children who need to see themselves portrayed in a positive manner – encouraging racial pride and strong self-esteem, making their experiences real and valid on the printed page, and/or providing coping mechanisms for their experiences as “minorities” in mainstream society. The texts simultaneously address European readers, portraying the world in all its diversity, and revealing African Americans as an enriching part of the larger American experience.

The chapter begins by discussing general developments in children's literature. It then traces the history of African American children's literature, considering the sizeable body of late nineteenth-century Sunday School literature by African American women, produced under the auspices of church publishing companies. The chapter concludes by touching on the careers of several leading authors and illustrators, including picture-book creators Julius Lester, Faith Ringgold, Tom and Muriel Feelings, and Leo and Diane Dillon, and young adult fiction writers Virginia Hamilton (1936–2002), Walter Dean Myers, and Jacqueline Woodson, as well as exploring the work of an author not traditionally associated with the field: Toni Morrison. The list of writers and artists mentioned throughout the chapter is by no means inclusive (or intended to be exclusive); it merely gives an overview of some of the critical work produced in the last 150 years.

There are many paradoxes in the way children's literature is viewed in contemporary society. Adults often view childhood with nostalgia, recalling a time of innocence, freedom, safety, and lack of responsibility, and yet this stage of life is often constructed as a period from which the child cannot wait to escape. Furthermore, children are often celebrated as society's future, but are often not listened to in their everyday lives; their literature is similarly often disrespected, thought to be merely frivolous entertainment, not worthy of discussion or serious study. Children are viewed as ready to learn, to be filled with the information necessary to mature into productive members of society, but adults often hesitate and argue over what material is appropriate for what age, if at all.

One important thing to note is how children's literature has changed over the years according to how perceptions of children have changed. In agrarian cultures where folk stories such as the fable of “The Ant and the Grasshopper” or the myth of Persephone's kidnapping or the tale of how Anansi the Spider got a thin waist were told to the entire community, children and adults were viewed as equally able to access the stories for entertainment, educational

lessons, and reminders of social rules and mores. The roots of contemporary children's literature are in these oral tales passed from one generation to another – stories that were not specifically tagged for children; little distinction was made between “adult” and “children's” literature. Phillipe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), for example, describes how before the early modern era in Europe children's songs and stories, games and activities were not separated from those of adults. Children consumed both liquor and tobacco, and worked in the fields, kitchens, and shops from around the age of seven. It was not until the late fifteenth century that William Caxton's *A Book of Curteseye* (1477) – one of the first books explicitly written for children – was published, and this text was only considered appropriate for the elite classes. The same was true of Johan Amos Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* [*The Visible World*] (1658), a primer in Latin and German that was the first to use pictures to entice (upper-class) children to learn to read.

As time went on, various influences began to change society's perception of children's special needs. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Puritanism emphasized the spiritual development of youth. A strong belief in the need for all community members to read the Bible led to an increased focus on reading and encouraged literacy among the middle classes. One of the most famous early schoolbooks in the colonies was the *New England Primer* (c.1685–90), comparable to Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) in England.

John Locke's focus was more secular: he philosophized on the intellectual development of children, posing children's minds as *tabulae rasae*, or blank slates, in his 1693 *Thoughts Concerning Education*. And Jean-Jacques Rousseau concentrated on the moral development of children. His didactic novel *Émile* (1762) encouraged more literature that was supposed to teach children how to be “good and proper” human beings.²

American writers of the 1800s, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64), viewed children as morally enlightened, and thus somewhat superior to adults, who were corrupted by the world around them. In the early 1900s, J. M. Barrie was one of many international writers who viewed childhood as fun, without care or responsibility. In England, this view was partially inspired by the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901); the nation's economic and political stability resulted in the sentimentalization of childhood. In both Britain and the States, this shifting view toward childhood was also stimulated by a lower infant mortality rate, which led to the fortification of the idea of “family.” An attitude often called “the cult of childhood” arose, and “the Golden Age” of

children's literature, which lasted into the 1920s, was further established by several interrelated factors: technological developments permitted cheaper and cheaper books to be produced; increases in the numbers of middle-class citizens meant more people could afford to buy books – both for themselves and for their children; and mandatory education legislation created a surge of casual readers.

Modern children's literature is typically divided into several major categories: folk stories, evangelical/morality tracts, poetry and verse, science fiction and fantasy (which is often separated into "high fantasy," set in completely imaginary worlds, and "low fantasy," which contains magical elements but is otherwise realistic), contemporary realism (mystery/detective stories, adventure and survival stories, "domestic fiction" and family stories, "boarding school stories," etc.), sports narratives, historical fiction and biography, picture books, and informational books.

Biographies and fictionalized treatments of biographies and historical topics have become one of the more popular genres within children's literature of the United States. Although a large number of African American biographies center on sports heroes – a point that certainly deserves further analysis – histories of the Underground Railroad, the story of Harriet Tubman, and books on slavery in general also abound. These are closely followed by an abundance of texts on Civil Rights leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges. Biographies allow writers of children's books to imaginatively recreate the past; to teach valuable lessons about bravery, determination, or overcoming fear or anger; to show that brown skin is not solely about the stereotypical media images of rural poverty or urban blight but rather about succeeding against the odds. Biographies can help African American youth to "develop a sense of kinship with their black forebears, letting them know that they do not stand alone," just as they can give the reader a chance "to become deeply involved in the lives of other black people in ways not possible in face-to-face contact."³ However, a concern that arises stems from the failure of the majority of biographies to delve into the wide range of African American history and achievements about which all children growing up in the United States should be informed. As Dianne Johnson-Feelings astutely notes about the disproportionate number of biographies published, young adults "may get the idea that the only people who have made contributions to society are truly exceptional people, rather than [sic] realizing that it is the *masses* as well as the leaders that shape the world."⁴ She also points to the dangerous conclusion that some teachers draw after reading the narratives of remarkable black subjects: that all

members of the African American community should be able to succeed if only they possess enough drive and inner strength. This assumption fails to recognize institutional racism as a powerful oppressive force in contemporary society.

For many years, poetry was one of the most popular genres for writers of African descent, partly because of its roots in the oral traditions of African American culture. In most recent years, however, poetry publication has experienced a downswing due to the desires of publishers who must follow market trends and high profits. Writers who continue to top lists of most-often taught and anthologized works include Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lucille Clifton. Folklore – such as the trickster tales of Br'er Rabbit and Anansi the Spider, and the legend of John Henry – is another genre from which the publishing industry has tended to shy away in recent years, except in the cases of established picture-book writers, but it continues to be successfully and extensively employed in elementary classrooms. Like poetry, written versions of folk tales usually highlight the oral tradition of African diasporic culture: the heavy use of dialogue, rhyme play, repetition, and strong cadence come together to recreate spoken-word art. Awareness must be raised, however, about the propensity to make folk tales the sole representation of African American, African, or Caribbean cultures, in the minds of children and adults alike.

Although nineteenth-century writer Maria W. Stewart (1803–79) is known primarily for her fiery lectures and pamphlets exploring faith, racial conflict, racial progress, and gender inequality, recent scholarship acknowledges the influence of her writings on African American youth. After leaving the public-speaking circuit in the early 1830s, Stewart turned to teaching for financial support. Decades later, her lecture “The Proper Training of Children” and her short story “The First Stage of Life” were published in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church’s *Repository of Religion and Literature and of Science and Art* (1861). These pieces are clearly framed for an adult audience, with “Training” specifically addressing “Ladies and Gentlemen,” “Mrs. President and Gentlemen,” and “Dear Mothers and Fathers.” However, given that the *Repository* frequently urged educators to share the periodical with their students, it seems likely that Stewart’s initial audience for much of her writing might have been her pupils.

Correspondingly, “The Two Offers,” a short story by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was also serialized by the *Repository*. Her well-known novel *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), as well as three serialized narratives, was part of the reading diet of the Sunday School movement. Both

writers' experiences reveal a much less stark dichotomy between "adult" and "children's" literature than exists today. Stewart, Harper, Julia Collins, and lesser-known authors such as Amelia E. Johnson were committed social activists who, besides working for racial uplift, women's suffrage, and Christian values, also saw the value of providing reading materials for youth and new adult readers who had historically understood the crucial role of literacy in the social and political structures of the United States even if – or because they had been – denied access to its power.

After these emergent nineteenth-century beginnings, the most commonly accepted date for the beginning of African American children's literature is the 1920 *Brownies' Book*, a magazine created and edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, August Granville Dill, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. This example of independent children's literature parallels the tradition of secular black periodical literature. The founding of the magazine by the highly influential *Crisis* – the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – in response to a cultural void is quite similar in intent to *Ebony Jr.*, founded in 1973 and circulated alongside its parent *Ebony*. A striking example of the social, political, and cultural necessity for *The Brownies' Book* can be found in the fact that *St. Nicholas Magazine*, one of the most prominent youth periodicals from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, printed the poem "Ten Little Niggers" around the same time that Du Bois's and Fauset's publication first appeared.

Famous black writers of the 1920s contributed poetry, short fiction, and educational essays to *The Brownies' Book*, and the magazine was illustrated with photographs of black children from various parts of the country. Each edition also included games, suggestions for future reading, and stories of famous people as well as ordinary yet successful citizens who could inspire young readers to strive for greatness. However, a marked attention to physical appearance – especially "long, wavy hair and a smooth, lovely [light] complexion," as noted on the back cover of the Number 10 issue⁵ – and insistence on snobbishly middle-class values ensured that many of the racial stereotypes to which the white American population clung were replicated in the magazine.

Children's literature scholar Nancy Tolson notes that leading Harlem Renaissance writers – Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950) – to name a few – published children's works. "With the help of these writers and many others Black children were able to know the historical backgrounds as well as the heroic figures who set down monumental tracks in the progressive movement for Blacks in America and the world."⁶ In the spirit of many vernacular traditions, Hughes did not

segregate his audiences by age – everyone in the community had something to bring to his art. In fact, he asserted that children make the best readers of poetry: “Children are not nearly so resistant to poetry as are grown-ups. In fact, small youngsters are not resistant at all.”⁷ By exploring Hughes’s pieces for children, scholars can observe the complex themes and images present in his adult writings in a more distilled form – particularly his celebration of African American culture and accomplishments despite racial injustice. As a “poet of the people,” especially the poor and dispossessed, what better forum than through works for children – often the most disempowered members of our society in their lack of independent agency – could Hughes express his ideas? As Steven C. Tracy, editor of the children’s biographies volume of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (2001), inquires: “And why not tell [the history of African American people] in a variety of genres, in a number of ways, across a series of decades, not only to adults needing to know the full history of their country, but also to children who craved its spiritual and intellectual nourishment and its social and political motivation?”⁸

Hughes’s *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book*, a poetic alphabet book, was copyrighted in 1932, although not published until 1994; *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* and *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* (the latter co-written with Arna Bontemps) were also published during 1932. *The First Book of Negroes* was released in 1952; *Famous American Negroes* and *The First Book of Rhythms* in 1954; *Famous Negro Music Makers* and *The First Book of Jazz* were published in 1955; *A Pictorial History of the Negro* and *The First Book of the West Indies* in 1956; *Famous Negro Heroes of America* and *18 Poems for Children*, which was originally published in *The Langston Hughes Reader*, came out in 1958, and *The First Book of Africa* in 1960. *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* was released by Prentice Hall in 1967, very shortly after Hughes’s death; *Black Misery* and *The Pasteboard Bandit* were also published posthumously, in 1969 and 1997 respectively. And yet, despite this prolific production of works for young people, Hughes is not often cited when the majority of people think of prominent African American children’s book writers.

Several excellent picture books about Hughes have been marketed for young audiences, especially in 2002, the centennial year of the poet’s birth. *Langston Hughes: American Poet*, written by Alice Walker and first published in 1974, was re-released in 2002 with an Afterword by the author and paintings by Catherine Deeter. In this text, Walker focuses on Hughes’s grandmother’s storytelling, highlighting the importance of the oral tradition in African American cultures and women’s active participation in this tradition.

Tony Medina's *Love to Langston* (2002), a collection of poems illustrated by R. Gregory Christie, also highlights the importance of Hughes's grandmother. In comparison with many other writers, Medina emphasizes this remarkable woman's participation in struggles for freedom and rights, not just her husband's involvement with John Brown. Like Walker's *Langston Hughes* and Medina's *Love to Langston*, Willie Perdomo's *Visiting Langston* (2002), illustrated with Bryan Collier's characteristic mixed media collage, points to Hughes's grandmother's storytelling as crucial to the young poet's development. The end of the book focuses not only on children's ability to appreciate reading or listening to poetry, but on the young female protagonist's love for writing poetry and the importance of self-expression. In her poems, she proudly announces who she is – "I'm a Harlem girl" – and where she is from – "I'm from ... Harlem world." She conveys a strong sense of self in the larger world, pride in her community and culture, her personal tastes – hip hop, for example – and her love for "mommy" and "daddy." Robert Burleigh's *Langston's Train Ride* (2004), illustrated by Leonard Jenkins, focuses less on the communal and the oral and more on Hughes's individual, intellectual, and artistic processes. The story charts the creation of a single poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which is quoted in its entirety at the end of the book.

While Hughes's fame and appeal have been incredibly long-lasting, Harlem Renaissance writers who were not already established in the industry in the 1920s had little chance of seeing their work in print. Furthermore, other than Hughes's *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932), few post-1950s readers are familiar with the children's works of the era: in other words, although child readers of these writers' generation may have been able to discover the glories of African diasporic achievement, today's children (and adults) have little to no exposure to these writings. Projects like Wade Hudson's *Pass It On: African-American Poetry for Children* (1993), Arnold Adoff's *My Black Me: A Beginning Book of Black Poetry* (1994), and Tom Feelings's *Soul Looks Back in Wonder* (1993) attempt to rectify this situation. In his preface, Feelings describes *Soul* as his attempt "to connect the ancient with the new, the young with the old, the unborn with the ancestors." He posits it as one way "for young people to see their own beauty reflected in our [African diasporic] eyes, through our work."⁹ Hudson similarly cites a "rich literary legacy" that many children fail to access.

Harlem children's librarian Augusta Baker was one of the major leaders of a 1930s and 1940s campaign to raise the standards of books for African American youth, promote positive images of black people in texts, and increase the number of literary role models in a non-moralistic way.

Rather than feed children the Sunday School fare that did not reflect their everyday experiences or stimulate their imaginations, she pushed for the production of work that would encourage the children in her community to read more and become proud and self-confident members of society. Jesse Jackson (1908–83), previously a juvenile probation officer, began writing after the Second World War in an attempt to improve the literacy and social consciousness of troubled boys – those who commonly could not find stories that reflected their experiences. His young adult novel *Call Me Charley* (1945) became popular among African American teens of the late 1940s. Arna Bontemps published *Story of the Negro* in 1949. Lorenz Graham (1902–89) published *South Town* in 1958 – the same year that Hughes released *Famous Negro Heroes of America* and *18 Poems for Children*. The novel *South Town* featured a black family confronting the racists of their rural Southern community. Graham recalls struggling to maintain the integrity of his characters:

I was told there was unanimous agreement that my book would have to be re-written. The Negro characters in my story were too much like other people. I countered that Negroes are like other people. I offered to change the plot, to add to or remove portions of the story, but I refused to change the character of the people.¹⁰

When Arna Bontemps published *Story of the Negro* in 1949, it became the first piece by a non-white author to win the Newbery Honor Award; the Newbery Medal, awarded annually by the American Library Association to the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year, had been established in 1922. It is worth noting that in 1956 Bontemps's book also won the Jane Addams Award – a collaboration between the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Jane Addams Peace Association – for a children's book that promotes peace and social justice. Not until 1975, however, did an African American author receive the Newbery Medal, and not just the runner-up Honor Book title: Virginia Hamilton won the prize for her novel *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. Leo and Diane Dillon broke a similar barrier in 1976 for picture-book illustration, winning the Caldecott Medal for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. Before those honors, however, the field was dominated by popular texts that featured black characters but were written by white authors. *Amos Fortune, Free Man* (1950), by Elizabeth Yates, winner of the 1951 Newbery Award, was a narrative with more positive images of African Americans than had existed previously in European American literature, yet the perspective was still patronizing.

The example that elicits the most passionate responses is *The Story of Little Black Sambo* by Scottish writer Helen Bannerman (1862–1946), first published in 1899. Bannerman originally wrote the tale to entertain her daughters, and over fifty versions have been published over the past century. The protagonist was polite and clever – in fact, his ingenuity enabled him to survive encounters with five hungry tigers. The caricatured illustrations, however, only reinforced common misconceptions of populations of African descent: the skin color of the characters was exceptionally dark, their lips were red and pronounced, eyes bulged. Bannerman also employed ridiculous names – a detail that is often overlooked by contemporary audiences who lack historical context. Readers in the 1990s and 2000s often have no idea that the name “Sambo” is a racial slur in the United States, derived from a term for a passive enslaved man but extending to stereotype African American men as shiftless and lazy. When combined, Sambo’s mother’s name, “Mumbo,” and his father’s name, “Jumbo,” suggest inarticulate babbling and superstition, reinforcing notions of African savagery and lack of civilization. Finally, the story appears to collapse all people of color from the British Empire into one indistinguishable group. Sambo is visually and nominally marked as a person of African descent, but details in the story suggest that the setting is India, where Bannerman lived for thirty years: the protagonist is stalked by tigers, which are native to Asia, not Africa, and at the end of the tale the predators melt into ghee, a basic ingredient of Indian cuisine.

Some modern readers assert that the book is important to keep on the shelves as a teaching tool; along with a guided dialogue, it serves as a reminder of the racist ideology of the past that we do not want to repeat. Others argue that, even without discussion, the book is important to circulate as a historical artifact: Bannerman was a product of her time and culture; furthermore, she created the piece privately, for her family, and the combination of African and Indian markers contribute to the fanciful locale of the tale and should not be taken as a realistic portrait of a culture and people. The point remains, however, that children reading the book absorb the derogatory images within. As psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum argues, people gather information about other races, ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and socio-economic classes from sources such as television, movies, magazines, and books.¹¹ If these sources provide caricatures (or do not represent the Other at all), children are especially susceptible to concluding that the Other is ridiculous, laughable, stupid, inconsequential, one-dimensional, alien. And children who belong to othered groups typically internalize this sense of themselves.

In a 2003 National Public Radio interview, artist Christopher Bing described *Sambo* as one of his childhood favorites. He re-illustrated the original text with lush, intricately detailed paintings, removing the cartoonish stigma of Bannerman's crude drawings and including an educational statement for readers at the end of the book about the reasons for controversy. Bannerman's original choice of the name Sambo is cleared of much of its racial baggage in the publisher's postscript to the Bing edition – "Sam- is an extremely common prefix for an Indian boy's name [Samir, Samrat, Sambit, Sambhdda, etc.]." ¹² However, the protagonist is still identified by his physicality – he is not "meek yet clever Sambo" or "smart and sassy Sambo," but "little *black* Sambo," repeated over and over again.

From an ideologically similar stance to Bing's, illustrator Fred Marcellino insists that the "good qualities [of the narrative ...] outweigh its racist elements" ¹³ and so adapted the book as *The Story of Little Babaji*, with new illustrations and a few alterations to the storyline. The boy and his parents are given Indian names: Sambo becomes Babaji, or, beloved Baba; Mumbo becomes Mamaji, and Jumbo becomes Papaji. The paintings here, too, are more realistic than Bannerman's, without exaggerated physiognomy: Babaji wears shorts and a T-shirt on the first page; a round archway and white-washed buildings suggest Indian architecture; Mamaji and other women wear saris; Papaji and other men wear turbans; the picture of Babaji crying over his lost clothes elicits pity, not laughter. Illustrations including multi-story buildings, Mamaji's sewing machine, and a photographer taking Babaji's picture in his new outfit also shift the reader from processing the locale as the jungle wilds, thus refuting an automatic association between Indian cultures and the primitive. However, Marcellino's adaptation incurs problems of a different sort: certain details suggest a strong colonial mentality. Babaji's "grand" clothes are European, not Indian; Papaji collects ghi, but Mamaji makes pancakes, not naan or roti. Meena Khorana concurs, asserting that Marcellino appears to celebrate the British colonization of India when he depicts the protagonist as a royal maharajah instead of a typical village boy, and that "cultural details are used for their exotic appeal," ¹⁴ and not to encourage cultural understanding.

Julius Lester also published an adaptation of *Little Black Sambo* in the 1990s. *Sam and the Tigers* was published in 1996, and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Pinkney recalls the original as the only book depicting a black child that he ever saw as a child, revealing the power of such texts on young minds. Lester kept that version out of his children's hands, but, like Marcellino, was captivated by the clever boy who could outsmart ferocious tigers. He

writes: "Many blacks, angered and shamed, resolved that it be thrown in the garbage. For many years, so had I. Yet what other story had I had at age seven and remembered for 50 years?" He struggled with the concept of "retain[ing] the fun without the historical baggage."¹⁵ Lester creates a fictionalized location for his story – Sam-sam-sa-mara, where animals and people live/work together and all the people are named Sam. This establishes a nonsensical humor in the tale, but also suggests that names are not important, like species, or age: it is the character that counts. Lester's revision of Bannerman's story privileges formal education and intellectual development in the African American community: Sam gets his fancy new clothes for school. The author also appeals to children's desire for independence. Sam's parents want to buy him a conservative brown jacket and white shirt, but Sam is allowed to select his own apparel. Additionally, Sam is the one who has the idea to collect the melted tiger butter and brings it home for his mother to cook with. And rather than one family gorging on the entire feast of pancakes, Lester has the neighbors come over to share the wealth and convey the communal spirit of African American culture.

The 1960s, an era of greater social consciousness and movements for equality, led to the publication of many more culturally realistic, accessible, ethnically diverse texts. Key to opening the eyes of many readers and educators were the Civil Rights Movement; the passage of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which set aside a substantial amount of federal funding for schools to buy African American books; Nancy Larrick's article "The All-White World of Children's Books," published on September 11, 1965 in the *Saturday Review*; and the Council on Interracial Books for Children, which was founded in 1966. "The All-White World" charged schools, educators, publishers, and public libraries to rectify the troubling dearth of images of characters of color in young people's literature – the study noted that only 6.7 percent of children's books published from 1962 to 1964 featured African American characters (in either text or illustrations); only 0.9 percent showed them in contemporary settings. Larrick noted the importance of representation not only for children who needed to see themselves and their experiences represented and validated in text, but also for white children who needed greater awareness of the society in which they lived.¹⁶ Chall, Radwin, French, and Hall repeated the study in the 1970s and showed that the numbers had risen substantially – of the books published between 1973 and 1975, 14.4 percent featured people of African descent, and 4 percent of these portrayed them in contemporary settings.¹⁷ However, Rollock's 1984 study of children's books suggested that the changes were only temporary since

a mere 1.5 percent of the children's books published from 1979 to 1984 depicted African Americans. She argued that the more politically conservative climate of the 1980s contributed to a significant decrease in the production of multicultural literature.¹⁸ And twenty years later, Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, and Gilmore-Clough contended that, despite a rise in multicultural publishing, genre fiction for middle-grade readers – westerns, fantasies, romances, horror novels, etc. – remained starkly lacking in racial diversity. Fewer than one in six of the more than 4,000 books reviewed featured at least one character of color; the authors asserted that in a more realistic portrait of society, about a third of the characters should be of color.¹⁹ (They based their findings on the US Census for the year 2000, which reported that one-third of children in the United States were of color.) All of these studies, however, paved the way for critical works by Rudine Sims Bishop, Violet J. Harris, Nancy Tolson, Dianne Johnson-Feelings, Donnarae MacCann, Daphne Kutzer, and others who analyzed the ways that race, ethnicity, and power function in children's literature.

The Snowy Day (1962), by white American writer Ezra Jack Keats, was a landmark picture book. Its collage artwork captured the attention of young readers and parents alike, and it was the first Caldecott Award-winning book with an African American protagonist. However, critic Ray Anthony Shephard argued that Peter, who appeared in seven of Keats's picture books, and the other black characters in the series were merely an integrationist's dream of "colored white kids."²⁰ Similarly, in 1974, *The Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox won the Newbery Medal for its powerful narrative about the horrific experiences of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage. The story filled in major gaps in the history of the United States, similar to adult novels that gained much notoriety in the following decades: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). However, *The Slave Dancer* still told the story from the perspective of a young white male. Fox's protagonist is a child who comes from an economically struggling family; he has been abducted, making his experience an excellent parallel for the enslaved captives, who also lack choice, options, and recognition as fully viable human beings in the society contained on the ship. However, Jessie still belongs to the racially privileged group, and thus the narrative never fully enters the insider consciousness of the African people at the center of the action. The story is truly about his development, not individualizing the African cargo. Very much like M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994), the story of a young lesbian on a Kansas farm told from the perspective of her heterosexual younger

brother, Parr, the narrative of *The Slave Dancer* privileges the “safe” and “comforting” voice of the dominant gender and culture.

W. H. Armstrong’s *Souder*, winner of the 1970 Newbery Medal, occupies the same space: like both *The Snowy Day* and *The Slave Dancer*, it was highly praised and widely recognized for opening the door to the non-mainstream experience, but also written by a white author. Cosette Kies’s study of horror literature for young adults reveals a similar trend: in older texts by white writers, “voodoo” consistently appeared as both intriguing and frightening at the same time, relegating a complex African diasporic religion into a convenient plot device.²¹ More recently, perhaps due to an increased sensitivity toward others’ religious and cultural values in the United States, the positive aspects of vodun have begun to be represented in the literature. There is still a distinct need, though, for “insider” voices.

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s urged for self-sufficiency in African American communities, and marked a distinct shift in the establishment toward recognizing that African Americans could be authoritative about their own culture and experiences. In 1970, the first Coretta Scott King Book Award was presented to Lillie Patterson by the New Jersey Library Association for her biography *Martin Luther King, Jr., Man of Peace*; the express purpose of the prize is to “encourage the artistic expression” of African American experiences, and it currently goes only to African American writers and illustrators. Since 1982, the award has fallen under the American Library Association’s official prize list, and winners are celebrated “for outstanding inspirational and educational contributions [...] that] promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream.”²²

Perhaps one of the more innovative historically based books for children was published during this era of renewed cultural awareness and pride: Julius Lester’s adaptation of slave narratives, *To Be A Slave* (1968), illustrated by Tom Feelings (1933–2003), was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1969. Other notable works include Virginia Hamilton’s novel *Zeely* (1967), which describes the racial awakening of a young African American girl in a story without racial conflict. When the character of Geeder sees Zeely Tayber for the first time, she is captivated:

Zeely Tayber was more than six and a half feet tall, thin and deeply dark as a pole of Ceylon ebony ... She had very high cheekbones and her eyes seemed to turn inward on themselves. Geeder couldn’t say what expression she saw on Zeely’s face. She knew only that it was calm, that it had pride in it, and that the face was the most beautiful she had ever seen.²³

As mentioned earlier, Hamilton's *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974) was the first text by a writer of African descent to win the Newbery Medal; Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* followed suit, earning the award in 1977. (The next African American to receive the Newbery Medal, however, was not named until the year 2000, when Christopher Paul Curtis won for *Bud, Not Buddy*.) Leo and Diane Dillon's Caldecott-winning illustrations for *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* (1976) featured pastels, watercolors, and acrylics in a rich blend of colors. More importantly to the era, however, was the artists' attempt to make certain that the scenes in each pictorial frame represented a snapshot of African life – each tries to include a man, woman, child, home, artifact, and local animal. Further, the interwoven design of the borders was uniquely African: based on the Kano Knot of sixteenth- through seventeenth-century Nigeria, it represented “endless searching” and could be said to be highly appropriate to the political and cultural agendas of many African Americans of this period.

Because of its stark representation of the realities of 1930s Mississippi, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* has found a place on the American Library Association's list of most contested texts. It was the ninth most challenged book of 2002 for “insensitivity,” depictions of racism, and offensive language (the word “nigger” appears several times throughout the novel). When protagonist Cassie Logan's parents wonder if certain stories will be too harsh for her and her young siblings to hear, one recognizes that the concern applies to contemporary children as well; African American parents are often the source of the challenges when the book finds its way onto school curricula. One Florida mother, for example, did not want her son to experience the distress and anxiety of discussing such painful moments in history in a public setting, especially since he was the only African American member of his class.

This reaction corresponds to the uproar caused by Carolivia Herron's picture book *Nappy Hair* (1997). Because the phrase “nappy headed” has traditionally been used as a slur in African diasporic communities, with this texture of hair being conceived as “bad,” parents in a New York elementary school became distressed when they learned that a white teacher was reading a book with this title to her predominantly African American and Latino class. A series of poorly selected photocopies, a vigorous rumor campaign, and – perhaps most importantly – the heated emotions that resulted from trying to come to terms with years of racist representations and internalized self-hatred, eventually led to threats against the teacher and her resignation from the school. However, although the book begins with conformist notions of a European standard of beauty – Brenda's hair is called “willful,” her family

claim Uncle Mordecai “ought to be ashamed” for teasing the child about a subject as loaded as her hair, and the angels of his story try to dissuade God from ruining this “innocent” child by giving her nappy hair – it shifts to redeem this texture of hair as positive. The story is firmly rooted in the African American cultural tradition, using a call-and-response narrative style, and stresses pride in one’s African ancestry. The book establishes nappy hair as a connection between people of the diaspora, and a visual sign of one’s roots. It is called “cute”; it is associated with strength and rebellion as it conquers “wimp” hair; it is linked to festivity and celebration as it “danced on through”; it is confirmed as a gift from God, who creates nature’s “perfect circle” in the kinks and thus meets His own desire for difference.²⁴ (For a more extensive discussion of perceptions of black hair in the African American community and several children’s book and film responses, including Alile Sharon Larkin’s *Dreadlocks and the Three Bears* [1991], Fred Crump, Jr.’s *Rapunzel* [1991], Tololwa M. Mollel’s *The Princess Who Lost Her Hair* [1993], and Herron’s *Nappy Hair*, see Neal Lester’s chapter “Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African American Daughters and the Politics of Hair” and reviews of Joyce Carol Thomas’s *Crowning Glory* [2002] and bell hooks’s *Happy To Be Nappy* [1999].²⁵)

One commonality between African American children’s literature and the larger body of black writing is the use of coming-of-age themes. For this reason, many books by African American authors are considered appropriate for young adult readers, especially when the protagonists are youth. We recognize Walter Dean Myers, Jacqueline Woodson, Angela Johnson, Christopher Paul Curtis, Sharon Bell Mathis, Sharon Flake, Rosa Guy, Alice Childress (1916–94), Joyce Carol Thomas, Nikki Grimes, and Kristin Hunter as young adult writers, but often fail to include works such as Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter* (1930), the story of a young boy’s experience growing up in Kansas in the early twentieth century (and based loosely on Hughes’s own life), which easily fits into the genre. Many major African American authors have written for children, including James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. No doubt driven by the same motivation – the need for good books about the African American experience for all children – these writers add significantly to their importance as writers overall.

Another often-ignored aspect of children’s literary production is the illustration accompanying the text in picture books and many middle-grade readers. Audiences fail to recognize that there are visual patterns, just as there are linguistic patterns; pictures convey narrative elements; colors, shapes, and

perspective can be “read” for important connotations just as syntax and grammatical structure are analyzed for subtle connotations and themes. In order to gather the full impact of the work, the text must be read *along with* the illustrations.

Several specific characteristics can be examined and analyzed in picture-book art:

(1) STYLE, whether cartoonish, highly realistic, or reflective of the art of a particular time period, artist, or ethnic group. For example, Pascal Lemaître's illustrations for Toni and Slade Morrison's *The Book of Mean People* (2002) are quite simplistic, resembling a child's own artwork and thus enhancing reader-identification. One of the illustrations reinforces this connection by depicting the little bunny coloring pictures of the mean people he or she knows, surrounded by art supplies. The illustration of the protagonist's mother trying to feed him peas shows her arm extended to an impossibly long length, suggesting the long arm of The Law – the parental authority that doesn't always make sense to children – represented quite literally. Similarly, when the bunny gets in trouble at school for not writing his letters between the lines, the complaint that ensues is “But his [teacher's] letters are in the spaces and on top of mine,” accompanied by an illustration of the sad-faced protagonist shrunk down small enough to stand on the corner of the notebook. Feeling small translates to being small in Lemaître's picture.

In striking contrast to this minimalist style, complex blends of textures and media are characteristic of Bryan Collier's work; his illustrations, comparable to the collages of earlier master artist Romare Bearden, are captivating to children and adults alike. Combinations of watercolor and cut paper illustrations are featured in Doreen Rappaport's biographical accounts *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2001) and *A Freedom River* (2000), a tale from the life of John Parker, ex-slave turned prominent businessman who became a conductor on the Underground Railroad; watercolor, paper, fabric, and bits of Langston Hughes's poetry are collaged in Willie Perdomo's *Visiting Langston* (2002).

Margaret M. Hurst's *Grannie and the Jumbie* (2001) also employs fabric: the artist pieces together scraps of cloth that themselves serve as “story fabric” with tales to tell about the island culture of St. Thomas. Thus, the illustrations not only help to convey the plot and emphasize textual details, but potently reflect elements of cultural traditions. Similarly, Faith Ringgold's paintings often feature quilts, either in the pictures themselves, or as part of the frame; *Tar Beach* (1991) featured the text pasted onto a collage of fabric scraps that framed the central illustration like a quilt square. The art of this

group of illustrators can thus be read in conjunction with literary works such as Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" and the essays in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) – focusing on a long-unrecognized art form that embodies the African American experience of making elaborate Something out of scraps of Nothing – or texts such as Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard's *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (2000). Again one witnesses the intersections of materials for adults and children.

A Story, A Story (1970), an Anansi the Spider tale retold and illustrated by Gail E. Haley, features woodcuts in order to convey the simplicity of detail appropriate for the genre of legend, but the repeated patterns resemble African cloth prints; Ashley Bryan also developed a visual arts style influenced by traditional African art, such as block printing and woodcuts, and African American folk arts: *The Dancing Granny* (1977), inspired by his grandmother's storytelling, captures the motion of dance on the page. Ringgold, too, harkens back to the folk art of storytelling in that much of her work features flying characters, reflecting traditional folk stories where enslaved people could fly away to freedom. One example is *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992), the tale of a young girl in the present-day United States who learns about Harriet Tubman and viscerally experiences the Underground Railroad in a dreamlike sequence; another is the well-known *Tar Beach* (1991) – the story of a girl who imagines she can fly over New York City and claim all she sees – which earned a Caldecott Honor and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award in 1992, and the Ezra Jack Keats New Writers Award in 1993.

(2) LINE. Curves and circles often suggest coziness and security; zigzag lines evoke excitement; horizontal lines can convey calm and stability in their resemblance to solid ground. Keats's *A Snowy Day* (1962) features sharp angles and stocky squares for the constructed buildings of its urban environment, whereas the snow itself, part of the natural world, lays in soft, rounded clumps and hills. The picture set inside Peter's bedroom on the opening page is also filled with curves, from the round circles on the iron bed frame, to the flowing line of the comforter and pillow; from the patterns on the wallpaper and his pajamas, to the very rounded shape of his profiled head.

(3) SPACE. Open spaces can suggest serenity and peace, or loneliness and isolation. In contrast, a crowded and "busy" layout can create a claustrophobic, uneasy feeling. Brian Pinkney's scratchboard illustrations often conjure emotions of frantic urgency because of the overwhelming number of strokes visible in the pictures, giving a sense of teeming, and have thus been productively employed for tales of the supernatural, such as Robert D. San Souci's

Sukeey and the Mermaid (1992) and *The Faithful Friend* (1995), and Patricia C. McKissack's *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural* (1992). Pinkney's style can also be analyzed as its own independent text: the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* note that in *The Dark-Thirty* the artist "instantly alerts viewers to inversions of familiar black-on-white, typical in printed texts, by using [...] a technique [that] begins with a white board covered in black ink. The ink is then scratched off with sharp tools, revealing the white underneath. The African American experience is thereby signaled immediately as different."²⁶

(4) COLOR. Warm colors like reds and yellows can bring excitement to mind, whereas cool blues and greens evoke calm. A book like Herron's *Nappy Hair* features vibrant yellow and orange backgrounds in its first three spreads, which cover both pages; purple, lavender, bubble-gum pink, a rich red-orange, yellow, and finally blue are the background colors of the ensuing full spreads. The use of bright "candy" colors associated with fun and play reinforces the positive message of the book to the child reader – "nappy hair" is something about which to feel exhilarated, not somber or scared. Furthermore, readers get a sense of settled "normalcy" by the end of the book when the background sky is painted its traditional blue. The protagonist Brenda is painted into a landscape of her family and the natural world that emphasizes her ordinariness in the realm of artistic representation.

(5) PERSPECTIVE. An up-close vantage point can get readers to feel more engaged in the action, whereas a scene viewed from far away leads to feelings of detachment, which can be important in instances where frightening subject matter is distanced to avoid overwhelming the child reader. For instance, in many of Giselle Potter's illustrations for Toni Morrison's *The Big Box* (1999), the reader appears to be looking down into the box in which the three children are imprisoned, rather than being locked in the box with them. In one of the final illustrations for Robert San Souci's *The Talking Eggs* (1989), illustrated by Jerry Pinkney (Brian Pinkney's father), readers see the wicked sister, Rose, being chased by an assortment of wolves, snakes, toads, and bees. Pinkney situates the reader near enough to the frightful animals to feel like part of the action, and thus also part of the punishing force that chases Rose for her cruelty and laziness. At the same time, the reader is clearly behind the creatures' line of sight, and thus out of the way of potential harm. Pinkney's highly realistic watercolors are distinctly recognizable and add to the sense of immediacy; his work has earned him four Coretta Scott King Illustrator Awards: one for Valerie Flournoy's *The Patchwork Quilt* (1985), one for Crescent Dragonwagon's *Half a Moon and One Whole Star* (1986), one for

Patricia McKissack's *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1988), and one for Alan Schroeder's *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* (1996); he has also received numerous Caldecott Honor Awards and the 1995 Boston Globe–Horn Book Prize for his Julius Lester's *John Henry* (1994).

As opposed to the situation in adult literature, collaboration is highly valued in the production of children's literature, especially in the illustrated books. Writer/illustrator teams are often recognized for their combined artistry. Tom and Muriel Feelings, along with Leo and Diane Dillon, are among the most famous of these teams; more recently, one might notice the repeated pairing of artist Shane W. Evans with writer Doreen Rappaport. Evans has also partnered with a good number of celebrity writers like Shaquille O'Neal (*Shaq and the Beanstalk* [2002]), bell hooks (*Homemade Love* [2002]), and Michael Jordan's mother Deloris (*Did I Tell You I Love You Today?* [2004]), demonstrating a definitive trend toward popular culture and the pull of the marketplace: many of these books have gained popularity because of their crossover appeal and have been featured on programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Today Show*, *NBA Inside Stuff*, *Reading Rainbow*, and *Late Night with David Letterman*. Evans is the artist behind Jean Marzollo's Shanna book series, and the character is certainly better known to many young children as a television interstitial on the Disney channel than as a character in a picture book.

The Dillons work so interconnectedly that they identify their work as created by a "third artist," distinct from either of them individually. (They have also collaborated with their son, painter and sculptor Lee Dillon, on several picture-book projects, including Leontyne Price's retelling of *Aida*.) Besides being recognized for being the first African American winners of a Caldecott Medal in 1976, the Dillons also garnered great acclaim for being the first winner(s) to earn the Caldecott Medal for two years in a row: first for their batik-inspired watercolor paintings in Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and then for their illustrations in Margaret Musgrove's *Ashanti to Zulu*. The Feelings' project of *Moja Means One* earned a Caldecott Honor in 1972, and in 1974, Tom Feelings earned the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for his illustration of Muriel's *Jambo Means Hello: A Swahili Alphabet Book*; the project was named a Caldecott Honor Book in 1975.

Besides grouping the pieces by era, or by genre, children's literature can also be broken down into three major categories, which Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson identify as "social conscience books," depicting the variety of conditions of one's fellow human beings, "melting pot books," representing children of all ethnicities and races as the same aside from complexion,

language, or religion, and "culturally conscious books," which portray the specific, unique character of African American people and culture.

Melting pot books have largely fallen out of fashion in African American literature since the 1970s, although the general concept has by no means disappeared from the public sphere: much of the media frenzy, intellectual debate, and campaign rhetoric of Barack Obama's 2008 run for the presidency of the United States revealed anxiety – and attempts to assuage it – about the primacy of race in considerations of identity and the authenticity of "Americanness" for black subjects. There are still quite a few popular authors whose work includes images of black children and families while not addressing racial issues overtly. Writer-illustrator Vera B. Williams, for instance, author of *A Chair for My Mother* (1982) and "*More, More, More,*" *Said the Baby: Three Love Stories* (1996) (both Caldecott Honor Books), among others, specializes in simple, family-focused, realistic fiction for young readers that often centers around the tasks of sharing and helping, not culturally specific topics.

Amongst African American authors from the mid-twentieth century onward, one of the earliest in the "social conscience" category would be Rosa Guy. In 1951, Guy co-founded a creative writing workshop with John O. Killens that would later become known as the Harlem Writers Guild. Acclaimed artists such as Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, and Audre Lorde participated in the group. Powerfully affected by the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, however, Guy turned to juvenile literature; she desired to pursue how violence affected youth, and her career as a YA author was launched with the publication of the trilogy *The Friends* (1973), *Ruby* (1976), and *Edith Jackson* (1978). The three books addressed issues of race, complexion, ethnicity, class, and gender in ways that much other coming-of-age literature of the time failed to do. *Ruby*, for example, is identified as the first YA novel to address lesbianism.

Many of Guy's novels center on the tensions that exist *within* the black community, such as the conflicts of socio-economic class and complexion. *My Love, My Love, or, The Peasant Girl* (1985), for example, a contemporary rewriting of Hans Christian Andersen's Romantic-era "The Little Mermaid," describes the doomed love affair between an impoverished, dark-skinned young woman and a white-skinned member of the island-setting's elite. The novel was adapted into the popular stage musical *Once Upon This Island*. Guy's work is often praised for its simple honesty, speaking directly to the needs of teen readers.

Jacqueline Woodson sees her life as "committed to changing the way the world thinks, one reader at a time."²⁷ Her young adult literature has been

praised for its exploration of difficult topics such as racial violence, incest, and homosexuality, and thus makes her another key writer in the body of texts classified as social conscience books. Woodson might also be seen as a literary descendant of the New Realism movement that arose in the United States in the 1960s as a challenge to the sentimental children's literature of the previous decades. This collection of work addressed issues that had long been taboo: sexuality, teen violence, child abuse, drug addiction, and racial bigotry.

Woodson's *Hush* (2002) deals with identity in complex ways. Thirteen-year-old Toswiah is figuring out the path between childhood and adulthood just as she and her family are forced to leave everything behind to join the Witness Protection Program – not just their physical belongings but their identities and relationships as well. This transformation is compelled by her father's choice in the moral dilemma of staying true to the fraternity of police officers, or testifying that a fellow officer, who is white, shot a young African American boy from a motive other than self-defense. *I Hadn't Meant To Tell You This* (1994), a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, confronts the controversial subject of sexual abuse while also addressing race and class barriers in the friendship of two girls. While the reader might initially suspect the African American Marie to be made invisible because of race, much in the tradition of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), it is Lena – the white character – who is rendered silent and unseen by her peers and in the larger society. In fact, Marie's upper-middle-class status and social popularity make her highly visible – at least on the surface – in her school: she has been voted "Best Dressed" for two consecutive years.

Woodson states: "I write about black girls because this world would like to keep us invisible. I write about *all* girls because I know what happens to self-esteem when we turn twelve, and I hope to show readers the number of ways in which we are strong."²⁸ Although her focus is typically young women, she does not exclude young men from her narrative creations. In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995; named a 1996 Coretta Scott King Honor Book), a teenager must handle the realization that his mother is in love with a woman. The 2001 Coretta Scott King Award winner *Miracle's Boys* (2000) explores the way that three brothers cope with their mother's unexpected death and struggle to survive on their own. And as Sims Bishop states: "If Woodson's work is issue oriented, it is never superficial. If it is edgy, it is also emotionally honest. Her characters have depth, and the situations they face are complex."²⁹ These qualities prevent readers from tackling the texts in a cursory way; as they access the books and grasp hold of the nature of the

conflicts, they are able to truly understand the conditions of their fellow human beings, no matter how different these subjects might be.

Like Woodson, Eloise Greenfield also addresses self-esteem for African American children, but through the medium of poetry. Her desire "to provide young children with words to love and grow with and to portray African American children who have a good self-concept"³⁰ can be read as part of the legacy of Du Bois's and Fauset's *The Brownies' Book*, and is witnessed throughout her oeuvre, including texts such as *Honey, I Love and Other Poems* (1978), a collection which celebrates a child's favorite things in life, and *Nathaniel Talking* (1988), poems from the perspective of an African American boy in an inner-city neighborhood. Her work is known for the sense of hope it offers to young black children and its depiction of the hardiness of the African American family and larger community. *Africa Dream* (1977), the poetically rendered story of a girl's journey across time and space to meet her ancestors in Africa, won the Coretta Scott King Award in 1978, and Greenfield won the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children in 1997.

Walter Dean Myers's novels would also fall within the category of social conscience books. In 1968, he won a picture-book contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children for *Where Does the Day Go?*, a story about an ethnically mixed group of children who share their ideas about night and day. This early piece coheres with the "melting pot" ideology in its representation of a wide range of children but focus on a subject with universal appeal; however, Myers is best known for his young adult literature, much of which has dominated the awards scene and is often controversial in more conservative circles, especially for its frank depictions of violence. *Scorpions*, a 1989 Newbery Honor Book, focuses on gang rivalry in the urban core; *Fallen Angels*, winner of the 1989 Coretta Scott King Award, addresses the experiences of young soldiers in the Vietnam war; *Somewhere in the Darkness*, awarded a Newbery Honor in 1993, depicts the harsh realities that fourteen-year-old Jimmy Little must face when his father – a convict on the run – takes him away from the stability of grandmother's home; *Monster* (1999), illustrated by Myers's son Christopher, combines diary format, screenplay, photographs, and court sketches to convey the story of a young teen, identified by one teacher as an "outstanding young man [...] talented, bright, compassionate,"³¹ who gets tried for a murder committed during a drug store robbery. It was a National Book Award finalist, a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, and the winner of the ALA Michael Printz Award for Excellence in YA literature. Myers's nonfiction work has also garnered acclaim: *Now Is Your Time! The*

African American Struggle for Freedom won the Coretta Scott King Award in 1991 and *Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary* won it in 1994. Myers's choice of Malcolm X – a figure commonly associated with violence and racial tension in the American mainstream – again points to his tendency of stepping away from “easy” topics and figures who allow readers to focus on an alleged “sameness under the skin”; by exposing his audiences to the often harsh conditions experienced by marginal subjects, Myers urges understanding for all types of people and encourages a celebration of difference. In 1992, he earned the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature for Young Adults.

The selling power of Walter Dean Myers's name has also been used to promote less well known writers, such as Stacie Johnson, author of the *18 Pine Street* series – a set of books about a solidly middle-class group of teens who hang out at a local pizzeria. Myers's name appears on the front covers, while Johnson's only appears on the title page, along with the fact that the series was created, and not penned, by Myers. This example illustrates how economic factors and the increasingly intense competition of the children's book market have the potential to contribute more and more to ideological conflicts between authors' intentions and desires – especially in the projects of less-established writers – and the pull of the marketplace.

Culturally conscious books have taken the place of the openly assimilationist narratives, again demonstrating a level of social and political activism in children's literature that can sometimes supersede that found in writing for African American adults. Three of the distinct ways that contemporary writers seek to incorporate African American cultural traditions into their texts is through a stylistic emphasis on orality, including using vernacular forms of speech; the inclusion of traditional African American folk songs and folk stories; and an engagement with the unique history of African Americans in the United States. John Steptoe's *Stevie* (1969), for instance, was a groundbreaking picture book in its non-patronizing use of a black vernacular and in its urban setting (Steptoe is best known, however, for his illustrations, and especially for his picture storybook combination *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* [1987]).

Lucille Clifton is a prime example of a writer whose work is infused with the African American oral tradition. Perhaps this is why, after Langston Hughes, Clifton is one of the most anthologized African American poets for young people. She was raised in an environment where her father often told her the stories he remembered from his great-grandmother – an African woman from Dahomey who had been abducted by slave traders in the early

1800s – and thus the power of the voice, the conversational tone of spoken language, and the theme of strong family ties shine through in her work. Clifton has created a number of picture books, including *The Black BC's* (1970), a verse picture book; *Amifika* (Special Recognition in the 1978 Jane Addams Book Award competition); and *Don't You Remember?* (a 1974 Coretta Scott King Honor Book). Clifton's fiction series, centering on Everett Anderson, a young African American boy, is also emblematic of culturally conscious narratives: in the first book, *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson* – named one of the *School Library Journal's* Best Books of 1970 – the protagonist proclaims "I'd be as silly / as I could be, / afraid of the dark / is afraid of Me!"³²

Mildred D. Taylor is another writer who describes growing up immersed in her father's stories. The preface to the 1976 edition of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* pays tribute to the "master storyteller" who could tell a story to make a listener hold her sides with laughter or shiver in her skin: "My father died last week. The stories as only he could tell them died with him. But his voice of joy and laughter, his enduring strength, his principles and constant wisdom remain ... within the pages of this book."³³ And like both Clifton and Taylor, Patricia McKissack recounts being raised in a household of master storytellers. She situates herself as a link in a long chain of raconteurs: "[A]s a writer and storyteller, I am particularly proud of the way my slave ancestors salvaged West African story remnants, reshaped old folk heroes, and cast them in new tales. These stories were sometimes humorous, sometimes sad, and sometimes very scary, but each one recorded the unique experiences of African Americans – who used their lore to teach, to entertain, and to cope in a cruel and hostile environment."³⁴

McKissack thus creates a uniquely African American cultural space in her books by including elements of the folk culture into her work. She sees it as her mission to expose today's children to these stories and others from around the world, hopefully broadening their worldview and appreciation of other cultures. Examples of her African American folk picture books include *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural* (1992), for which she was awarded a Newbery Honor, *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1988), and *Flossie and the Fox* (1986). Her work is easily grouped with that of Virginia Hamilton, whose death in 2002 left a chasm in the children's literary community. Hamilton earned a Newbery Honor in 1989 for *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from around the World*, and the Coretta Scott King Award for other folk-inspired work: *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* and *Her Stories: African American Folk Tales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* – both collections of folk tales – won in 1986 and 1996, respectively.

A prolific writer of various genres, from folk stories to domestic fiction to biographies, Hamilton viewed storytelling as a way for all people to “keep their cultural heritage safe, to save the very language in which heritage is made symbolic through story.”³⁵ This statement, which suggests a type of interiority and focuses on cultural maintenance, stands in interesting contraposition with Julius Lester’s views of storytelling as an intimate act that extends outward, connecting him with other people regardless of background: “We need to share our stories because in so doing we hope to be understood, and being understood we are no longer so alone.”³⁶ Lester is perhaps most famous for his renditions of African American folk tales, and the distinct storytelling voice of his texts: *John Henry* (1994) revisits the tall tale of the railroad man who beats a machine, and *How Many Spots Does a Leopard Have?* (1989) introduces folk stories from Africa and from Jewish culture. Thus, rather than promote the cultural specificity of African American communities, Lester strives to establish bridges that focus on the resonances between African and non-African cultures and peoples. Two of his adaptations of Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus tales, *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (1987) and *More Tales of Uncle Remus* (1988) – both Coretta Scott King Honor Books – could thus be seen as attempts not to reclaim African American cultural production and reassert the “authentic” black voice, but to recognize common sources of humor and enjoyment and create links between a variety of readers.

Another African American children’s book author who has gained widespread acclaim for her contribution to folklore preservation is Joyce Carol Thomas. Thomas has been influential in bridging the gap between adult and children’s literature by reintroducing the work of Zora Neale Hurston in picture-book form. Her adaptation of *The Three Witches*, illustrated by Faith Ringgold (2006), succeeds in its appeal for young readers in a combination of ways: the plain and uninflected narration shies away from gruesome detail; similarly, the simple, naive style of the paintings is expressive in their vibrant colors but not overly dramatic and potentially frightening for young readers. Thomas’s rendition of Hurston’s *The Six Fools* (2005) also retains the rich oral style for which Hurston is known.

The underlying cultural references in Thomas’s YA novels also point to the African American folk tradition. *Marked by Fire* (1982), Thomas’s debut novel and a National Book Award Finalist, follows the life of Abyssinia Jackson, a young Oklahoman woman blessed with the gifts of song and storytelling who must survive traumas from a natural disaster to physical assault. Abby’s saga continues with *Bright Shadow* (1983) and *Water Girl* (1986), a story that involves an emotional search for roots and identity – a prescient topic for African

Americans of all ages – and explores how maternal love can be just as intense from an adoptive parent as from a biological one. *Journey* (1990), a fast-paced narrative with elements of marvelous realism, details how Meggie Alexander, an African American teen, must confront a trio of wicked old men set upon murdering the young people of the community for their organs. In close communication with the spider world that eventually saves her life, Meggie represents a connection to African folk tales and culture – Anansi the Spider is a traditional trickster figure in West African and African Diasporic literature – and communal values.

Besides establishing herself as a tremendous folklorist, Virginia Hamilton was also passionate about acknowledging and preserving the previously ignored history of African Americans. *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* (1988), which earned the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for Nonfiction and the Coretta Scott King Prize, details the life of an enslaved young man whose life takes dramatic turns because of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Other noteworthy life-writing projects include *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (1972) and *Paul Robeson: The Life and Times of a Free Black Man* (1974). McKissack and Taylor are also noted for their historical narratives: McKissack's *Christmas in the Big House – Christmas in the Quarters* (1994) and *Days of Jubilee: The End of Slavery in the United States* (2003) were created with her husband, Frederick L. McKissack, and their collaboration *Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?* won the Boston Globe–Horn Book Prize for Nonfiction in 1993. Like nineteenth-century writers Maria Stewart, Frances Harper, and Julia C. Collins, McKissack began creating work for children because, as an eighth-grade teacher, she was bothered by the dearth of African Americans in the literature for her students.

Mildred Taylor's interwoven series of novels are realistic explorations of the history of racial oppression in the American South. In a prelude to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, she describes the history she learned, not from school-books or teachers, but from her relatives and other members of the African American community:

I learned a history not then written in books but one passed from generation to generation on the steps of moonlit porches and beside dying fires in one-room houses, a history of great-grandparents and of slavery and of the days following slavery; of those who lived still not free, yet who would not let their spirits be enslaved.³⁷

The novel inscribes events and experiences that had once been erased, or twisted and denigrated, by mainstream culture and “official” historical

documents. The narrative refers to big moments in history like slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the First World War, but spins a web of personal histories and herstories with their accompanying pain, humiliation, and injustices, as well as their focus on family, loyalty, strength, bravery, ingenuity, and pride. For example, readers learn about the never-ending cycle of poverty sustained by “the company store” but also of challenges to the exploitative economic system instigated by those who refused to be subjugated, even at the risk of their land and their safety. Readers intuit how competition in the labor force after the abolition of slavery pit poor whites against recently freed blacks. They gather details about the gruesome brutality of lynching, and the sexual and emotional abuse that accompanied the physical abuses of slavery. The social and psychological effects of prejudice and discrimination are further explored in *Song of the Trees* (1975), *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), *The Road to Memphis* (1990), and *The Well* (1995). Taylor’s *The Friendship* (1987) won the Boston Globe–Horn Book Prize, and *The Land* (2001) won the Scott O’Dell Historical Fiction Award. (Taylor was also a three-time winner of the Jane Addams Book Award for children’s literature that works for world peace and justice: *Song of the Trees* in 1976, *Roll of Thunder* in 1977, and *The Well* in 1996.)

The last author to be explored in depth in this chapter is one whose name might initially surprise some readers. Since 1999, Toni Morrison has joined the ranks of African American authors who are famed for their adult writings, but who have entered the realm of children’s literature in an attempt to reach a larger audience: Sherley Anne Williams’s *Working Cotton* (1992) details a young black child’s day in the cotton fields with her family of migrant farm workers; Ntozake Shange’s *White Wash* (1997) addresses the problems of bullying and cruelty inspired by ignorance and racism; bell hooks’s *Happy to be Nappy* and *Be Boy Buzz* (Jump at the Sun/Hyperion 2002) promote racial pride and strong sense of self.

Morrison’s *Who’s Got Game* series, retellings of Aesop’s fables like “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” and on which she collaborated with her son Slade, was identified by a January 2004 *Ebony* Book Review as enjoyable for all ages. Some readers, however, have labeled the books as inaccessible to children and accused Morrison of writing beyond the intellectual potential of her audience. The confusion about to whom the books are really addressed speaks to folk traditions where the community is valued as a whole and to a time when literature was not separated for listeners by age. Morrison strives to reach children, but not just as isolated readers; she also seeks out the adults who buy the books and hopefully will read the tales aloud to the children in their

lives – or at least answer the questions they might have about the ambiguities in the stories.

As mentioned above, Puritanism and the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau heavily influenced children's literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idea of morality, often narrowly defined, comes up in discussions of Morrison's picture books. One parent, an online book reviewer, called *The Book of Mean People* (2002) a disappointment: "It is not appropriate for children of any ages" because it "portrays teachers, mothers, friends, siblings and grandparents as mean people because they have expectations of the child."³⁸ Morrison asserts that the book is not about condemning adults, but rather about how children interpret lessons they might not want to hear: "these mean people are not really mean. They are simply speaking a language that [the child is] trying to learn."³⁹ Tellingly, although the bunny identifies his/her mother as "mean" for preparing peas for dinner, the illustration does not present the parent as threatening in any way. The child is learning healthy habits – a lesson s/he does not particularly *want* to learn – and thus the mother is cast in a negative light. When the bunny is confused by being told to sit up *and* sit down, readers must intuit that this is about learning different types of language; frustration over chess is about learning the rules of the game, the rules of good sportsmanship, and again about language ("knight" versus "night").

The Big Box also interrogates conventional adult-child power relations where adults are always in charge and always correct, and, as Morrison notes, "parents ... don't like to be criticized."⁴⁰ The parents, teachers, and neighbors in the book set up rules for the three child characters, but these rules are revealed to be more for the parents' comfort than for the children's safety or emotional growth. Patty "fold[s] her socks" and "eat[s] her beets," Mickey doesn't do drugs, and Liza Sue does her fractions and "gave up peanut brittle," but their nonconformist behaviors "made the grown-ups nervous" and so they are placed in a big box until they learn to obey social norms. Both texts end on a radical note of freedom and escape – one especially poignant in the context of African American history. In the last illustration of *The Big Box*, the children climb out of the box and into the landscape; in the last illustration of *Mean People*, the bunny escapes out of its clothes and leaps on all-fours, rejecting social norms and rules of containment. These texts clearly privilege the child's perspective, and not adult wishes for the "good" child.

Morrison also describes the *Who's Got Game* project as a reframing of the didactic moralizing of the original fables: "[Slade] didn't like stories that had all those morals at the end – they were like lessons to be learned. And even

though they may have been correct, they were like doors slammed in your face [... The point of our versions is] not about heroes and villains – it's not about which one is right."⁴¹ In *The Ant or the Grasshopper?*, for example, the Morrisons credit the foresight of the hard-working ant, but they also celebrate the creativity and spontaneity of the grasshopper. In the end, neither looks happy in his situation. Readers might choose one character or the other as making the best decision, but the text does not provide an explicit answer; rather, it encourages thought and dialogue. Changing the title of the Aesop story from "The Ant *and* the Grasshopper" to "The Ant *or* the Grasshopper" prompts the reader to consider the options right from the start, and perhaps to find a middle ground: "The problem, of course, is that there shouldn't be any conflict between those two. They are friends, after all."⁴²

The Lion or the Mouse? (2003), the second book in the series, conveys messages about bullying and bragging, and valuing image over substance. It, too, suggests important ideas about how to be a good friend. *Poppy or the Snake?* (2003), the first of the series with no regular rhyme scheme, still maintains its roots in the oral tradition aesthetic by establishing a frame story in which a man tells his grandson about his encounter with a snake; the tale is passed from one generation to another and both the boy and the reading audience must use their interpretive skills to figure out how the story relates to the boy's dilemma of not wanting to go back to school. This frame and the fable work together to teach a lesson about paying attention – a key to intellectual success – and thus the story has practical use as well as entertainment value. In the story within the story, Poppy appears to be the weaker character: he is an old man, and seems gullible because of his guilt about accidentally running the snake over with his truck. The snake not only possesses his poisonous fangs, but is a skilled orator, able to manipulate the situation with his emotional pleas. The conflict is not a battle of size and strength, however, but rather a battle of wits – a crucial element to many African American folk tales.

The Coretta Scott King Award, the Ezra Jack Keats New Writers Award, Lee & Low's New Voices Award, which features a cash prize and a publishing contract, the Americas Award for Latin American children's books, and contests such as those sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children have been crucial in bringing more African American youth literature to the attention of readers around the globe. At the same time, literature about black people from other nations remains sparse-to-unobtainable in bookstores in the United States; these texts can even be difficult to purchase in their local markets. Sarah Mahurt notes that internet resources are presently

easing some of the restraints on accessibility, but one cannot fail to notice the domination of folk tales as the representation of Caribbean and African cultures in children's literary circles.⁴³ In the same way that the preponderance of American children's literature on slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the key figures of Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks can keep child readers and adult purchasers and teachers trapped in a narrow notion of the richness of African American history, the preponderance of conventional folk stories from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa fails to show contemporary readers the linguistic, religious, cultural, geographical, and economic diversity of the regions, or that individual nations have progressed into the twenty-first century. The question remains "What sells?" – or, more insidiously, "What sells the most?" And how do readers shift the desires of publishers to meet their own needs and desires?

Jonda McNair argues that the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act did not put black children in the forefront of educators' agendas; rather, "economic incentives took precedence in that publishers capitalized on an opportunity for financial gain."⁴⁴ In their chapter on the neglected literary form of periodicals for African American young people, Lynn Cockett and Janet Kleinberg investigate the YA publishing industry, looking at magazines from *Seventeen*, *Teen*, *YM*, and *Sassy* to *Black Beat* and *Young Sisters and Brothers*. They attribute the demise of *The Brownies' Book* and *Ebony Jr.!* to the failure of both to carry advertisements; on a related note, they argue that the lack of visual diversity (especially with cover models), articles addressing race, and human interest stories about or including African Americans in *Seventeen*, *Teen*, and *YM* is likely due to the fact that these magazines' publishers market their products to the section of the population with the most disposable income – "white, suburban, and middle-class females."⁴⁵ Recognizing these market pressures, they express hope that census data predicting a 50 percent increase in the African American population in the United States by the year 2030 will lead to the creation of new magazines for this growing population.

While many of the authors mentioned have become household names in the children's book industry and published with major/mainstream publishers, independent publishers of African American children's literature such as Black Butterfly, Just Us Books, and Lee & Low have also found a niche in the market, and can often publish more inexpensively than the trade industry. The expense of a book becomes important in relationship to distribution. Elaborately illustrated books with top-quality paper can be far too costly, a problem that has not been adequately addressed. Those who are conscious of the importance of these books and can afford them are likely to be the

educated elite. Getting the books into the hands of the readers on whose lives they might have a more significant impact continues to be a pressing concern. The trade industry has addressed this issue by creating different levels of books, publishing some very cheaply – such as the inexpensive easy-to-read books that are readily adaptable for classroom use – and others in collectors' editions.

In spite of these changes, and the struggle to provide a brief-yet-thorough discussion of this huge body of work given the page constraints of this volume, a marked discrepancy is still apparent: in the year 2000, only ninety-six of the approximately 4,500 children's books published in the United States were written or illustrated by African Americans. This statistic is especially distressing given the results of a 1998 study that showed that for over one hundred African American first through fourth graders, reading comprehension significantly increased when stories featured images of black people and references to black cultures; thus, as Jonda McNair compellingly argues, African American children's literature not only is about building self-esteem, but "has the potential to increase the educational achievement of African American children."⁴⁶

Notes

1. Stratemeyer produced several popular series of juvenile fiction, including the Bobbsey Twins novels, the Nancy Drew mysteries, and the Hardy Boys adventures. While Laura Lee Hope is the name credited to all stories in the Bobbsey Twins series, these books, like the other series, had many authors – including Stratemeyer and his daughter – who used not only the same template but the same pseudonym as well.
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3. Carol Jones Collins, "African-American Young Adult Biography: In Search of the Self," in Karen Patricia Smith (ed.), *African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), pp. 1–29; p. 1.
4. Dianne Johnson-Feelings, "The New Seed: Depictions of the Middle Class in Recent African-American Young Adult Literature," in Smith, *Voices in Young Adult Literature*, pp. 143–167; p. 145.
5. Quoted in Johnson-Feelings, "The New Seed," p. 147.
6. Nancy D. Tolson, "Introduction," *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora* 3.1 (Spring–Summer 2001): 9–11; 10.
7. Langston Hughes, in Christopher C. De Santis (ed.), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. ix: *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 363.

8. Langston Hughes, in Steven C. Tracy (ed.), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. xii: *Works for Children and Young Adults: Biographies* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 1. See also Langston Hughes, in Diane Johnson (ed.), *The Collected Works*, vol. xi: *Works for Children and Young Adults: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Writing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).
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12. "Some Thoughts and a Bit of History" [publisher's postscript], *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, written by Helen Bannerman, illustrated by Christopher Bing (San Francisco, CA: Handprint/Chronicle Books, 2007).
13. Belinda Luscombe, "Same Story, New Attitude," *Time.com* (September 9, 1996), www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985099,00.html. Accessed March 7, 2005.
14. Quoted in Charles Temple, Mariam Martinez, and Junko Yokota, *Children's Books in Children's Hands: An Introduction to Their Literature* (New York: Pearson Education/Allyn and Bacon, 2006), p. 99.
15. Julius Lester, Author's Note, *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (New York: Puffin Books, 2000), np.
16. Nancy Larrick, "The All-White World of Children's Books," *Saturday Review* (September 11, 1965): pp. 63–65, pp. 84–85.
17. Jeanne S. Chall, Eugene Radwin, Valarie W. French, and Cynthia R. Hall, "Blacks in the World of Children's Books," *The Reading Teacher*, 32.5 (February 1979): 527–533.
18. Barbara Rollock, *The Black Experience in Children's Books*, 2nd edn (New York: New York Public Library, 1984).
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20. Quoted in Henderson and May, *Exploring Culturally Diverse Literature*, p. 271.
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23. Virginia Hamilton, *Zeely* [1967] (New York: Aladdin Books, 1993), pp. 31–32.

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26. Jack Zipes et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 1066.
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28. *Ibid.*
29. Rudine Sims Bishop, *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), p. 239.
30. Temple et al., *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, p. 104.
31. Walter Dean Myers, *Monster* (New York: Harper Tempest, 2004), p. 235.
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33. Mildred Taylor, Author's Note, in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (New York: Puffin Books, 1997), np.
34. Temple et al., *Children's Books*, p. 241.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
37. Taylor, Author's Note, np.
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46. McNair, "A Comparative Analysis," p. 3.

From writer to reader: black popular fiction

CANDICE LOVE JACKSON

Scholars freely define movements within the African American literary tradition according to type, geographical location, or historical period. Some scholars dismiss the legitimacy of the “popular” as a justifiable category unless they specialize in cultural studies. The trajectory of the tradition, of course, embraces the vernacular, oral origins of the literature and the eighteenth-through twentieth-century print manifestations; it is aligned with political, social, and cultural movements that are not specifically “literary.” Any vexation scholars feel, then, about “popular” literature negates this fact of the tradition. After 1865, we can identify literary movements in the making of New Negro anthologies to represent the best of the race. It can be argued that there was the consolidation and elaboration of such efforts in the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance. Though the modernist experimentation of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s may not have been viewed as movements exactly, the Black Arts Movement (see Chapter 19) obviously was one and may arguably be the last self-conscious effort to represent the race. Works classified as “New Black Aesthetic,” “hip hop,” and “Post-Soul Aesthetic” represent fascinating ideas about changes in black identity. In all of these movements and tendencies, the very notion of what is “popular” or not “popular” but literary is a matter of sustained contention. The notion of the “popular” seems always to be linked not with time but with taste.

What has created a semblance of continuity in literary production has been the construction of the African American literary canon through the publication of notable anthologies, from *The New Cavalcade: African American Writing from 1760 to the Present* (1992) to the most recent offerings, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), now in its second edition (2003), and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998). These anthologies have carefully established a canon within which the *popular literary* texts are represented by the works of Maya Angelou, Albert

Murray, Toni Morrison, Ernest J. Gaines, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler. These authors are canonized by the academic community. Their "sainthood" is rarely challenged by including writers who have been "canonized" by a non-academic readership. The popular writers of each movement, then, are most often neglected by literary scholars and critics who compile anthologies; the popular works are deemed to be outside the paradigm of the African American literary tradition. Popular writers and, subsequently, the "popular literature" they produce, though, continue to make an indelible impact on changing the parameters of African American literary studies, African American readers, and American culture.

In the nineteenth century, Sutton E. Griggs would have been considered "popular" and Charles Chesnutt literary. Nevertheless, some critics would not acknowledge the "popular" as an oppositional category for analysis until the Harlem Renaissance and the publication of the upstart magazine *Fire!!*: A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists (1926). Edited by Wallace Thurman, the magazine included the work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Thurman as well as artwork by Aaron Douglas and Richard Bruce Nugent. It was a deliberate breaking away from what this new generation of writers considered the staid, "respectable" writings of the previous generation; W. E. B. Du Bois, in particular, was a noted target of this new generation of black literati. The magazine's subtitle clearly denoted a shift in authorial function and audience, which became the hallmark in delineating works as popular.

The artists published in *Fire!!* began their careers as literary upstarts exploring themes of black sexuality, including homosexuality, intra-racism, and intra-classism. Many of the themes explored in *Fire!!* and, subsequently, throughout the Renaissance are now enjoying a revival of sorts in the various genres of black popular literature. The first short story, Wallace Thurman's "Cordelia the Crude, a Harlem Sketch," traces the evolution of a young promiscuous woman into a hardened prostitute. Accompanied by Richard Bruce Nugent's provocative artwork – a naked woman beneath a palm tree invoking images of African primitivism – "Cordelia the Crude" allows Thurman to set a new direction for African American writing. Hurston's one-act play *Color Struck* exposes the dichotomy of color in the black community. Poetry by Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Helene Johnson and others seeks to memorialize the black experience in America. Arthur Huff Fauset's "Intelligentsia" provides the theoretical basis for *Fire!!* and the work of the now canonized Harlem Renaissance mavericks. Fauset's disdain for self-appointed black intellectuals is most apparent, for he

describes this intelligentsia as merely “add[ing] to the lexicon and one or two hifalutin’ notions about the way the world should be run [...] the contribution of Intelligentsia to society is as negligible as gin at a Methodist picnic.”¹ The black intelligentsia of the 1920s who decried the new aesthetic of these new and popular writers, according to Fauset, “give art and artists a black eye with their snobbery and stupidity; and their false interpretations and hypocritical evaluations do more to heighten suspicion against the real artist on the part of the ordinary citizen than perhaps any other single factor in the clash of art and provincialism.”² Interestingly, Fauset prophetically describes the theoretical battle between the literary writer and the popular writer who must compete for the citizen-reader.

In the “Preface” to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and later in the preface to *God’s Trombones* (1927), James Weldon Johnson calls for developing literature that will signal black intelligence and humanity. He addresses the popular reception of dialect poetry, noting “no poetry is being written in dialect by the colored poets” of the period and that “the Negro poet in the United States ... needs now an instrument of greater range than dialect.”³ Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) also examines the cultural and historical functions of black writing, but it is clear that Hughes and Johnson do not share the same ideas about the purpose of literature.

Black writers have occasionally provided theoretical ideas from which to describe the movements of their times. Just as the Renaissance writers expressed their generational difference from Du Bois’s contemporaries, Richard Wright, progenitor of a new modernist black fiction of realism and naturalism, denounced the Renaissance as “humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937).⁴ Thus, as the Renaissance’s popularity segued into respectability and subsequently its own canonization, a new generation of black writers approached the delineation of the African American experience with decidedly different definitions.

At the time Richard Wright was emerging as the premiere black writer, beginning with the publications of *Native Son* (1940) and his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945). Frank Yerby made a successful career writing romance novels set in the antebellum South. His novel *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946) made him a best-selling African American author as well as the first to have a novel optioned by a major studio; the film version stars Rex Harrison and Maureen O’Hara and was a box office success. Few of Yerby’s white readers during the height of his popularity were aware of his racial identity. Those few

of his black readers who were may have recognized Yerby's costume novels as strategies by which he disguised racial themes.

Owing to what can only amount to racism in the publishing industry, early twentieth-century black novelists were tasked with proving their viability as bankable writers capable of attracting a multiracial readership. Thus, popular black fiction in the 1950s was oddly synonymous with literary fiction and such easily recognizable names such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Despite Wright's popularity, by the time he published *The Long Dream* in 1958 he was considered out of touch with the black American mainstream; his coming-of-age tale of a young Mississippi teen acquiescing to a system of racial oppression with a philandering, financially prosperous father as his guide did not suit the needs of a burgeoning rebellious readership. His expatriation augmented this disconnection with black readers, as the definition of popular literature, fiction and poetry, morphed with the changing social and political times.

By the end of the Civil Rights Movement, specifically the 1960s, African American literature had begun to reflect changing and divergent responses to social and political oppression. The second and third generations of the Great Migration as well as new migrants to urban centers began to rely heavily on poetry as a form of literary expression. The popular poetics of Black Arts Movement writers, including Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), had mass appeal because it allowed immediate, participatory responses from the audience. However, novelists emerging in the 1970s were as racially and socially conscious as their contemporaries who used poetry but seemed to have embraced history rather than topical responses to understand the current incarnations of American racism and political turmoil. One of the most popular novelists during this period was Chester Himes, whose literary career began in 1945 with *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, but who is best known for his detective fiction featuring recurring characters Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones (*A Rage in Harlem*, 1957; *The Real Cool Killers*, 1959; *The Crazy Kill*, 1959; and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 1965). As the Black Arts Movement ended, a divergence between literary fiction and the popular continued. The 1970s, particularly, saw the rise of racially conscious fiction but not the protest literature that was the hallmark of earlier periods. Toni Morrison's novels (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970; *Sula*, 1973; *Song of Solomon*, 1977) and those of Alice Walker (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970; *Meridian* 1976) are prime examples of the changing function of African American fiction. Morrison also advanced change as an editor for Random House where she shepherded the early careers of Toni Cade Bambara and

Gayl Jones. Alex Haley gave the fictionalized account of his family's slave history from the kidnapping of his ancestor Kunta Kinte from Gambia in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), encouraging a renewed focus on slave history, a focus pioneered earlier by Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1966).

The hope exhibited by these novelists was often in direct contradiction to the realities of the ghettos in the urban centers. Black pulp fiction, a category to be used not interchangeably with popular fiction but as a genre within it, situates its characters clearly within the milieu of the urban centers and focuses largely on tropes associated with black criminality. In the late 1960s, Holloway House Publishing in Los Angeles recognized the changing American landscape and the angst of black America, and channeled those energies into producing mass-market paperbacks extolling both the vices and the virtues of the urban black community. Not surprisingly, Holloway House is white owned and controlled, which adds to the intense rejection of these works by some critics as manipulations to depict less-than-favorable representations of blacks. However, some would argue that the voices of these novels needed to be heard, despite coming from a white publisher. Holloway House's location in the film capital of the world during the emergence of Blaxploitation, or black-oriented, films popularized its two most prolific and profitable writers: Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim) and Donald Goines. Goines's work has never been out of print, and both have sold nearly 7 million paperbacks each. Beck and Goines are progenitors of a genre within African American literature which has received scant attention until recently as the lines between popular and mainstream become increasingly blurred.

Robert Beck (1918–92), writing under the pseudonym Iceberg Slim, published *Pimp, the Story of My Life* (1967) to much popular acclaim via a burgeoning underground network of readers, local television appearances, and newspaper interviews. Holloway House's attempts to promote the book in the *New York Times* were rejected solely on the basis of the title. The novel traces the rise and fall of a young man who becomes the (in)famous pimp – Iceberg Slim – and was extremely popular in the urban centers and prisons but reviled by critics – black and white – who regarded Pimp as a glorification and verification of black criminality.⁵ Beck, though, hoped that his novel of pandering would be accepted as revolutionary in the same way that works by Black Arts Movement poets and dramatists and Black Power nationalists were regarded. (Beck was decidedly disheartened by the Black Panthers' rebuff since he regarded pandering as a revolutionary act against an oppressive American society, not as part of an oppressive cultural structure.) So realistic, or rather avant-garde, was the publication of a novel about pimping that many

readers, according to current and former pimps profiled in *American Pimp*, accepted the novel as a blueprint for the pandering life, citing it as a major influence in their decision to become a pimp.⁶

Though Beck's name is synonymous with pimp literature, his subsequent novels explore other aspects of the black underworld but do so by incorporating conventional tropes in the African American literary tradition. In *Trick Baby* (1967), for example, Beck juxtaposes the tragic mulatto trope with the world of confidence schemes, while in *Mama Black Widow* (1969) he delineates the effects of migration on the black family led by a sinister matriarch. Beck frames each novel with his indomitably recurring character Iceberg Slim, who appears as the voice of both his essay collection, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971), and *Reflections* (1980), a spoken-word album of ballads in the vernacular tradition narrating the stories of various underworld personas, and in his short story collection, *Airtight Willie and Me* (1979). Beck's last novel, *Doom Fox* (1998), was published posthumously though there has been some question about the novel's authorship.⁷

Holloway House's success with Beck led to a conscious decision to promote a new voice of the black experience. Though Beck began what has definitely become its own genre within African American literature, Donald Goines (1937–74) has become its leading figure. Billed as the “master of the black experience novel,” Goines was one of the more prolific writers of the 1970s, appealing to an audience largely ignored by mainstream African American literature. However, using the term “black experience” to describe Goines (and Beck for that matter) seems a misnomer, as it emphasizes a restricted definition of what it means to be black in America rather than an alternative representation or voice. Between 1971 and 1974, Goines published sixteen novels, four originally under the pseudonym Al C. Clark. With scantily clad black women and gun-wielding black men, Goines's book covers belie the economic, political, and racial issues he addresses in his work from drug addiction to prostitution to black militancy. His novels *Dopefiend, the Story of a Black Junkie* (1971), *Whoreson, the Story of a Ghetto Pimp* (1972), and *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* (1973), which critiques the racial disparities in the criminal justice system, are perhaps his most well known. Those novels collectively regarded as the Kenyatta series – *Crime Partners* (1974), *Death List* (1974), *Kenyatta's Escape* (1974), *Kenyatta's Last Hit* (1975) – explore black nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, centering on a Huey Newton-inspired character, Kenyatta, who leads an organization that closely resembles the Black Panthers but invokes the spirit of liberation movements in other parts of the diaspora. Recently, W. W. Norton Publishing created their Old

School Books imprint, in an effort to reclaim crime novels of the 1950s and 1960s, including Donald Goines's *Daddy Cool*, reissued in 1997, and Robert Beck's *Mama Black Widow*, reissued in 1998. Beck and Goines are finally taking their rightful place in enlarging the idea of how the African American "literary" tradition is constituted.

Most recently, the pimp-authored text has been enjoying a renaissance; however, this is primarily in nonfiction. The publication of Donald Campbell's *From Pimp Stick to Pulpit: The Story of Don "Magic" Juan* in 1994 and the release of two documentaries, Brent Owens's *Pimps Up, Ho's Down* (1998) and Allen and Albert Hughes's *American Pimp* (1998), reignited interest in the pandering profession. This shift to nonfiction coincides with the phenomena of reality television and celebrity news and the cultural fascination with it. The publication of instructional tomes by Mickey Royal (*The Pimp Game: Instructional Guide*, 1998), Tariq Nasheed (*The Art of Mackin'*, 2000), and Alfred Gholson (*The Pimp's Bible: The Sweet Science of Sin*, 2001) along with several other memoirs by former pimps such as John Dickson (*Rosebudd, the American Pimp*, 2001) and Ken Ivy's *Pimpology: The 48 Laws of the Game*, with Karen Hunter (2007), have given new significance to the pimp-authored and black underworld texts.

As of 2008, the term "popular literature" itself has morphed into polysemic metaphors that rival the explosion of popular literature as a homogeneous genre. The meaning of the term varies widely: from "good" sales (7,500 copies is still a modest success in this genre) to a text with fewer sales, but one that still appeals to readers who keep the faith in the idea of black community. In the age of self-publishing, however, sales are reaching such phenomenal numbers – well into the millions – that mainstream publishers now acknowledge the viability of courting black readers and the sustainability of black readership. What is becoming increasingly problematic is that, as these popular texts become easier to read, they are also dangerously close to flooding their newly created market with hackneyed plots, gratuitous sexuality, and uninspiring characters. The rise of contemporary black popular fiction, then, becomes a challenge for scholars: should they continue to decry the content of some of these novels or should the celebration of increased black readership and analysis of expanding interests become primary? Clearly, black writers and readers are benefiting from an expanding marketplace and viability. Thus, eliminating the chasm between scholars, writers, and readers centers on whether these three entities come to terms with the expectations for the text.

Ultimately, black popular literature can also be defined by what its primary audience buys. Book clubs have proliferated in black communities across the

country, precipitated by the appeal of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. Only a smattering of African American texts, none of which would be considered popular, have been chosen. Thus, until African American males begin to buy more books, its predominantly female-centered audience will continue to determine black popular fiction's thematic output. We can only discover what makes literature "popular" by examining the needs and tastes of diverse audiences.

More recently, Charles Johnson's "The End of the Black American Narrative," published in *The American Scholar*, has addressed the black writers', and ipso facto black America's, reliance on oppression and victimization as the underlying tropes for black writing, and as the central topic in cultural conversations about blackness in America. As Johnson asserts, the "experience of victimization" from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement within the black American narrative has as its protagonist every black person in America.⁸ However, Johnson, whose best work is steeped, admittedly, in this history, notes that the black American narrative must begin to eschew the cultural consciousness of victimization and embrace the "rich diversity and heterogeneity" of black America in the twenty-first century.⁹ Allowing a new black American narrative, then, offers "new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplained present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality."¹⁰ Doing so celebrates difference and individualism within black America, allowing readers to redefine the cultural collective based on multiple experiences including those that go beyond race. Therefore, "popular" remains a term in transition, as identifying who are contemporary readers and writers is constantly and consistently undergoing a change within itself.

In the early 1990s, Terry McMillan became the undisputed originator of an emerging genre of black popular fiction examining the daily struggles and triumphs of the contemporary black female. Her early work, largely semi-autobiographical, has at its core elements of what is now referred to as literary fiction; McMillan's *Mama* (1987) delineates the black matriarch through an exploration of the trials of single-motherhood against a socially and politically changing backdrop. Largely unsupported by publishers, McMillan self-promoted *Mama*, which ultimately won the Doubleday New Voices Award and an American Book Award. Her sophomore novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), which experiments with narrative voice, sold more than 2 million copies. But her third offering, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), sold over 700,000 in hardcover and a staggering 3 million in paperback, remaining on the *New York*

Times bestseller list for thirty-eight weeks. McMillan even published *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary Black Fiction* (1990), highlighting the works of lesser-known, literary fiction writers. Ironically, she would soon be considered “popular” rather than literary and, as such, unworthy of scholarly criticism. McMillan’s early and late fiction (*The Interruption of Everything* appeared in 2005) can be understood by critical inspection of identifiable deeper structures and strictures related to traumatic relationships with predatory black males, generational differences with family matriarchs, single-motherhood, and a self-realization. Female characters learn to embrace the Self and their children, as well as forge an individualized spirituality while ignoring men, male culture, and white supremacy. While one can argue about the dimensionality of such structures, one cannot argue that such structures resonate with McMillan’s and her contemporaries’ core audiences. The success of *Waiting to Exhale* helped to change the publishing industry’s approach to black authors, leading to the careers of Bebe Moore Campbell, Tina McElroy Ansa, and Connie Briscoe, among others, and opening the doors for current writers from Kimberly Lawson Roby to Eric Jerome Dickey, who specialize in delineating black relationships.

In the tradition of Oscar Micheaux’s *The Homesteader* (1917), his autobiographical novel based on his life as a homesteader in South Dakota in the early 1900s, McMillan’s film adaptation (with Ronald Bass) of *Waiting to Exhale* set a new course for black popular fiction and black cinema in the modern era. The success of the film version starring Whitney Houston and Angela Bassett, though, precipitated a shift in black films as well; the first half of the 1990s saw a return of the gangster tropes of the black-oriented films of the 1970s like *Boys N the Hood* and *Menace to Society*. In the post-*Waiting to Exhale* years, Hollywood green-lighted a string of black films focusing on the daily triumphs and failures of black love and relationships rather than violence. Another hallmark of the new cinematic representation was the focus on the burgeoning black middle and upper middle class rather than the previous (and comfortable) images of an impoverished black community.

The 1990s also brought the return of black crime and detective novels to literary fiction and popular literature circles. Continuing Chester Himes’s legacy is most notably Walter Mosley, whose Easy Rawlins mysteries set in post-Second World War Los Angeles have achieved critical and commercial successes. Barbara Neely’s Blanche series (*Blanche on the Lam*, 1993; *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*, 1995; *Blanche Cleans Up*, 1999; *Blanche Passes Go*, 2001) examines American racial history as her protagonist, Blanche White, a domestic and amateur sleuth, investigates crimes and secrets surrounding the

families for whom she works and their communities. Other notable black female writers of detective fiction include Eleanor Taylor Bland (*Dead Time*, 1992; *Slow Burn*, 1993; *Gone Quiet*, 1994); Penny Micklebury (*One Must Wait*, 1999; *Where to Choose*, 1999; *Paradise Interrupted*, 2001); and Paula L. Woods (*Inner City Blues*, 1999; *Stormy Weather*, 2001). Female-centered detective stories remain marginalized as popular despite their impact in black fiction and expanding the representation of both black detective fiction and black women. Though Neely's work is out of print, she continues to enjoy, alongside her fellow female mystery writers, strong but small followings. One of the newer voices of black detective fiction, James E. Cherry (*Shadow of Light*, 2008), is gaining in popularity.

By the late 1990s, writers emerged who would continue to expand the notion of the popular and readers' expectations of black fiction. Kimberla Lawson Roby, who attained *New York Times* bestseller status with her very first novel in this category, *Behind Closed Doors* (1997), bespeaks the power and commercial viability of such texts. Eric Jerome Dickey's fiction, while comfortably fitting into the relationship-driven model, differs in a key aspect: the "victims" of bad relationships turn outward into the greater world of global intrigue to work out their existences, as opposed to turning inward to a particularized form of spirituality. Characters, such as those in Dickey's *Cheaters* (1999), bear the emblems of relationship-driven preoccupations, which not only imagine a never-ending quest for the relationship upgrade but also embrace the notion that a successful work-related reality will become personally beneficial. Carl Weber also fits more comfortably in the prescribed rubric of such fictional works, as his first book, *Lookin' for Luv* (2001), clearly illustrates. By a chance finding of the number of a dating service on a gymnasium floor, four (ostensibly heterosexual) male friends engage in a tangled web of dates that end either poorly or dangerously. Hallmarks of the genre are explicit sexuality, which is contradicted by the implication that love will take you to that higher realm wherein one is constantly happy, a realm called "love" or spiritual awareness. Characters are usually in their early twenties but no older than forty. This evinces a conscious strategy to reach younger audiences, which is further demonstrated by the relative ease in reading these texts.

Perhaps the most remarkable departure from the relationship-driven novel of the 1990s is Sapphire's *Push* (1996), the gripping story of Clariece "Precious" Jones, an illiterate, pregnant sixteen-year-old who suffers unimaginable physical and sexual abuse from both parents. Set in 1987, *Push* reimagines Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in the age of HIV/AIDS. Twice impregnated by her

father, Precious is mother to one child with Down's syndrome nicknamed Mongo, short for mongoloid, and anxiously awaits the birth and fate of the second. Expelled from her traditional school, Precious is placed in an alternative school where she meets Blu Rain, a compassionate teacher who teaches Precious not only to read, but also to love herself. Just as she is making progress, Precious learns that her father has died of AIDS, and that she has contracted the HIV virus from him, the only man with whom she has ever been intimate. In 2009, a film version, entitled *Precious*, premiered to great critical and commercial success despite criticisms that the film reinforces negative stereotypes (incest, welfare cheats, abuse, etc.) about African Americans. Produced by Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey, and directed by Lee Daniels (*Monster's Ball*), the film stars Mo'Nique as the abusive mother, Mary Jones, Mariah Carey as a dowdy social worker, and Gabourey Sidibe in her film debut as Precious. While Precious's suffering propels much of the film, audiences responded overwhelmingly to the film's universality as a story of personal transformation and triumph in spite of myriad adversities.

If the shift to relationship-driven fiction encompasses narratives driven by the interactions of (usually) a black woman and a black man, not surprisingly homosexual relationships represent an extension of this category. Whether heterosexual or homosexual, the deeper structures of these works involve relationship failures due to unfulfilled expectations; premarital sexual intercourse; parenthood; and the journey toward spiritual fulfillment as a way out of relationship madness. While much of the present popular fiction centers on heterosexual relationships, readers are increasingly developing interests in texts that explore homosexual themes. Though gay and lesbian fiction has its roots in the works of Harlem Renaissance writers such as Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen and continued most notably in the work of James Baldwin and Ann Allen Shockley, popular fiction delineating homosexual relationships no longer enjoys a segregated audience, but has become an integral part of mainstream black popular fiction. The most critically acclaimed but not commercially popular writers of black homosexual fiction are Larry Duplechan (*Eight Days a Week*, 1985; *Blackbird*, 1986; *Tangled Up in Blue*, 1989; and *Captain Swing*, 1993), Randall Kenan, (*A Visitation of Spirits*, 1989), and Melvin Dixon (*Vanishing Rooms*, 1991). Though their works are rooted in current sociopolitical issues surrounding race and sexuality, these writers traditionally refrain from the hypersexual representations that have plagued black popular fiction, homosexual and otherwise.

In the 1990s, Everette "E." Lynn Harris's (1955–2009) debut novel *Invisible Life* (1992) invigorated the black alternative lifestyle fiction genre for

mainstream readers. Harris sold copies of *Invisible Life* in black hair salons across the country, gaining enough word-of-mouth popularity to capture the attention of a mainstream publishing company. While the novel titillates readers with graphic sex scenes, gay stereotypes (effeminate males, snappy dialogue), Harris makes a greater impact with readers by exposing the closeted black male who maintains a public heterosexual persona. The success of *Invisible Life* spawned twelve novels, including *Just As I Am* (1995) and *And This Too Shall Pass* (1997) and one memoir, *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted* (2004). The last novel published during his lifetime, *Basketball Jones* (2009), examined the relationship between a closeted basketball star and his lover. The posthumously published *Mama Dearest* (2009) returns to a familiar character, Yancey Braxton, who stages a major comeback to the spotlight. Unlike earlier writers of homosexual fiction, Harris is decidedly in the popular vein, as many of his novels rely solely on navigating the homosexual trope through popular culture references rather than incorporating larger social and political issues surrounding homosexuality. Whereas Harris's initial target audience was heterosexual women and black gay men, James Earl Hardy's work appeals largely to a black gay male readership. This has definite thematic consequences, as Hardy's *B-Boy Blues* (1994) revolves around the love story between a young journalist and a bike messenger, which invites discussions of class and the socio-economic issues within a relationship that happens to be between members of the same sex. Hardy's subsequent novels, *2nd Time Around* (1996); *If Only for One Nite* (1997); *The Day Eazy-E Died* (2001); and *Love the One You're With* (2002) continue to examine the dynamics. Thus, Hardy examines the dynamics of a relationship in which the relationship, not gender, is the primary issue.

Perhaps ironically, the rise of black homosexual fiction coincides with the meteoric rise of contemporary Christian fiction. The roots of the African American literary tradition decidedly reflect the tenets of Christian theology. Though some secularly themed fiction references religion and spirituality, the narratives of contemporary black Christian fiction rely on the perceptions of Christianity within the black community. Indeed, even with that delimitation, the definition of the genre is tenuous, as there has always been such fiction in black religious circles which was never, until quite recently, considered a part of mainstream literature. Yet, this emerging sub-genre in black popular fiction does not simply appear; the theatricality of the black church has provided rich content for black writers from as early as Paul Laurence Dunbar's "An Antebellum Sermon" (1895) and James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927). The black preacher has consistently been a source of humor and scorn,

as he is often characterized as corrupt, hypersexual, and hypocritical in his actions. The delineation of the black church has fared similarly. Thus, the successes of contemporary Christian fiction writers are neither far-fetched nor new. Recent successes of racial integration in black mega-churches and the rise of celebrity ministers have expanded the marketability of black Christian fiction beyond black readers.

The narratives of the most famous minister and fiction writer of Christian fiction, Thomas Dexter "T. D." Jakes, exploring individual and communal spirituality, self-fulfillment, and spirituality-driven financial prosperity, have carved a space for themselves in competition with novels rife with sex and violence. Jakes's narratives (*Woman Thou Art Loosed*, 1994; *Cover Girls*, 2001; *Not Easily Broken*, 2006) reflect the populace of the modern church. The target audience of Christian fiction is primarily women, and the novels focus on the various abuses – internal and external – perpetuated against women who can only transcend their emotional and physical conditions through salvation. It is very important to note not only that each of Jakes's books reaches several bestseller lists (*Woman Thou Art Loosed* is on the *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestseller lists), but also that his sales figures are astronomical. A book by Terry McMillan, Eric Jerome Dickey, or Pearl Cleage combined could not reach such figures. Important to note, too, is that writers such as Jakes and Daniel Omotosho Black (*They Tell Me of Home*, 2006; *The Sacred Place*, 2007) receive publishing contracts from major New York publishers, Penguin, Random House, St. Martin's, etc., and that publishing is a business driven by sales. Black uses the Christian underpinnings of the genre in ways that differ from other practitioners. For him, salvation cannot be earned by Grace alone; it comes only in combination with good works. The appeal of popular black Christian fiction is squarely rooted in its ability to reach massive groups without inciting doctrinaire battles. The African American reading public is desperately looking for "inspirational" rather than "religious" texts that will help to both explain their social malaise and release ("loose") them from that malaise. While Jakes and Black are two of the most popular Christian fiction writers, several female authors have also emerged, but largely through self-publishing and small vanity presses. Of particular note is Charrita D. Danley's *Through the Crack* (2004), which explores the effect of drug addiction on the family unit, faith, and the Christian unconditional love needed to survive such an ordeal. Many of these works have been introduced to readers by black book distributors such as Black Expressions and Black Books Direct and are fueled by the Internet.

A trickier inclusion in the realm of popular literary studies is speculative fiction. Whether it is referred to as science fiction and/or fantasy or

speculative, the African American speculative fiction genre has its origins at the turn of the century – even before the onset of the Harlem Renaissance. Susanne Dietzel’s discussion of popular literature, specifically black science fiction, in the *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* is invaluable for tracing the critical sources and critical lens for black speculative fiction, noting that speculative fiction “has been part of African American literature from the beginning.”¹¹ Speculative fiction allows writers to conceptualize other worlds beyond our own in addition to examining the human condition through the supernatural or unconventional means. It is this unconventionality and difference that identifies these works as “popular,” as they are outside traditional thematic structures. Brian Aldiss defines the genre as “the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science).”¹² In “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction,” Charles S. Saunders traces the short, meaningful history of blacks in science fiction/fantasy or speculative fiction from Samuel Delany to Nalo Hopkinson as well as the representation of black characters in the works of white science fiction/fantasy writers.¹³ Acknowledging the small number of African American science fiction writers, Saunders recognizes the speculative elements in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987); however, the invocation of supernatural or speculative in African American literature is present throughout its tradition. Sheree Thomas’s groundbreaking anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and its follow-up, *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2004), map a history from the pre-Harlem Renaissance to the present. W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Comet,” Charles Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine,” and George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931) are early examples of the black science fiction imagination. In the late 1970s, though, Samuel Delany’s and the late Octavia Butler’s works established a presence of black science, or speculative, fiction, forging a path of accessibility for contemporary writers, Tananarive Due, Steven Barnes, and Nalo Hopkinson.

Samuel Delany, arguably the most prolific and intellectual writer of his time who chooses to write in the speculative genre, has become not only a forefather of black science fiction, but also a powerful presence in mainstream science fiction. Delany’s first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor*, appeared in 1962; he has since published twenty novels, most recently *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2008). Delany explores myriad issues, including class, various mythologies, and language. Much of his writing is autobiographical meta-fiction, as many of his characters are writers or poets who struggle with dyslexia and sexual orientation as Delany has. It was this sense of otherness that led him to

science fiction and fantasy and a quest to consistently redefine the Other. His later work, published after 1973, focuses heavily on sexuality. Three of his novels, *Dhalgren* (1975), *Triton* (1976), and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), elucidate the socio-economic and sociopolitical effects of sexuality on a futuristic society, and are so heavily laden with sexually explicit passages that Delany himself has described them as pornographic.

Perhaps the most well known African American science fiction writer for mainstream readers (read commercially successful) is Octavia Butler. A student of Delany's in the 1970s, Butler, like Delany, works both within and against the conventions of the genre. Whereas Delany focuses largely on the "liberation of male and female sexuality," Butler interrogates how women of color negotiate agency in a world that questions their humanity.¹⁴ She explores the social issues of class, gender, and race in an extended narrative form, frequently creating series of novels: *Patternmaster* (1976–84), *Xenogenesis* (1987–89), *Earthseed* (1993–98).¹⁵ Most science fiction readers, though, are familiar with her 1979 novel, *Kindred*, which centers on Edana, the fourth-generation descendant of a white plantation owner who travels to the antebellum South to save the life of Rufus, a young white male who would become her ancestor. In saving Rufus, she ensures her existence; however, each travel also threatens her existence. Edana must reconcile her abhorrence of America's slave past with her quest for self-preservation, which is further complicated by her interracial marriage. The popularity (critical and commercial) of *Kindred* paved the way for contemporary black speculative fiction writers. Unlike Delany and Butler, more recent writers of black speculative fiction employ more accessible narratives of black spirituality and psychic awareness in the context of daily life rather than in the creation of alternate universes or alien life forms.

Tananarive Due's work (*The Between*, 1995; *My Soul To Keep*, 1997; *The Living Blood*, 2001; *The Good House: A Novel*, 2003) blurs the lines between traditional African American literature and science fiction. Juxtaposing elements of African mythology, familial legacies of supernatural and spiritual gifts, and everyday life, Due's narratives are familiar and easily accessible to readers. This small collective of black science fiction writers also includes Steven Barnes and Nalo Hopkinson. Barnes, who began his career as a frequent collaborator with Larry Niven (*The Descent of Anansi*, 1982; *Achilles' Choice*, 1986), established himself independently as a writer with *The Kundalini Equation* (1986) and *Blood Brothers* (1996). He has been most productive, writing such novel series as Aubrey Knight (*Streetlethal*, 1983; *Gorgon Child*, 1989; *Firedance*, 1993) and Balistan (*Lion's Blood*, 2002; *Zulu Heart*, 2003) and two

Star Trek series novels (*Far Beyond the Stars*, 1998 and *The Cestus Deception*, 2004). Barnes's fiction explores various facets of the human experience and is largely devoid of race, which widens his audience base. Much of his work, however, explores the effects of a global reliance on artificial intelligence and survivalism in a futuristic society. Another major facet of Barnes's work is his nearly forty-year passion for the martial arts, in which his characters are extremely skilled, particularly Aubrey Knight of that series. Recently, he has collaborated with actor Blair Underwood and his wife, fellow science fiction writer Tananarive Due, on two novels, *Casenegra* (2007) and its sequel, *In the Night of the Heat* (2008). Barnes has also written and produced episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits*, *Andromeda*, and *Stargate*. Hopkinson, a Jamaican-born writer living in Canada, has published four novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), *Midnight Robber* (2000), *The Salt Roads* (2003), and *New Moon's Arms* (2007), as well as a short fiction collection, *Skin Folk* (2001). Her work consistently draws upon Caribbean history and language, particularly its oral storytelling traditions. Hopkinson's various racial and spatial identities contribute greatly to her inclusion as part of the tradition of African American writing.

Forty years after Robert Beck and Donald Goines defined the urban literary genre with novels documenting the horrors and humanity of black criminality, a new crop of younger authors have taken the reins and run away with it. Many of these authors have been named as successors to the legacy of Beck and Goines either by critics, by the authors themselves, or by their publishers. Whether these novels are referred to as "urban," "hip hop," "street," or "gangsta," their purpose is clear – to tell a story extolling the virtues of a community while acknowledging the consequences of its hubris and vice. These novels of crime, drugs, and sexuality appeal to a diverse readership from teenagers to prisoners to college students to adults in their forties. Early successes of Omar Tyree, Eric Jerome Dickey, and Sister Soulja led to the emergence of more graphic offerings by Teri Woods and Nikki Turner. Therefore, even within this genre, there exists a line of demarcation between writers and readers. Yet, the success is further bolstered by the rise of self-publishing and the influence of black readership-oriented enterprises. Mainstream publishers now find themselves competing for an expanded book-buying public, attracted to writers who are far more willing and able today to "sell" their books independently – from the trunks of their cars, in hair salons, or at book fairs across the country. One of the most interesting debates about the literary merit of street literature has been not between scholars but between librarians, particularly those in the public system. David

Wright, of the Seattle Public Library, recognizes the appeal for younger and provincial readers and implores librarians to remember that “the goal of promoting literacy is so central to the mission of every public library” and “to fail these new and emerging readers by ignoring this living literature goes beyond a disservice – it is practically a sacrilege.”¹⁶ Wright is also kind enough to provide his colleagues with a listing of the most prominent urban writers. As Wright clearly understands, urban writers, while titillating readers with graphic depictions of sex and violence, offer a new twist on the Everyman morality tale. When carefully crafted, these tales caution readers about lives full of misplaced swagger and devoid of greater purpose.

Omar Tyree’s debut novel, *Flyy Girl* (1993), centers on the life of a professed gold-digger, and his sophomore effort, *Capital City* (1994), examines America’s drug culture in the black community, particularly for the African American female, which resonated with his primarily female readership. Presumably, Tyree helped define the genre; however, Tyree, whose work had evolved to examine other subjects, such as black love, poverty, and the black family, has seen a noticeable decline in his popularity. For example, his *For the Love of Money* (2000), the sequel to *Flyy Girl*, introduced a more mature, educated protagonist than in the first novel; she has returned to her neighborhood with a Master’s degree and her drug dealer boyfriend has become a Muslim. The novel explores the evolution of the characters rather than have them mired in drama. Readers were not simply nonplussed; they were angry.

Lisa Williamson, or Sister Soulja, began her career as a social activist and rapper affiliated with the rap group Public Enemy. The angry black female media-constructed persona that emerged during her tenures with Public Enemy brought celebrity and the platform to discuss her views on race in America, views that were greatly controversial and advocated violence against whites at times. Her memoir *No Disrespect* (1995) made little impact; readers and critics alike, however, lauded her debut novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), as one of the best in an emerging genre. The title plays on the name of the title character, Winter Santiago, the daughter of a drug dealer, Ricky, who rears his daughters to believe in consumerism and materialism. When her father is imprisoned, her siblings are placed in foster care which she, denying her parentage, briefly escapes. Her journey from man to man and hustle to hustle ends with a fifteen-year prison sentence. As a meta-fictional twist to the narrative, Sister Soulja makes a cameo appearance in the text as she attempts to help Winter reorganize her priorities and change the direction of her life. Sister Soulja penned her second novel, *Midnight: A Gangster Love Story* (2008), as a sequel to *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

Teri Woods, a former legal secretary, published her novel *True to the Game* (1998) after six years of rejections by dozens of mainstream publishing houses. Like many of the urban literature writers, Woods financed and distributed her novel, selling over 1 million copies through a grassroots campaign that made her a millionaire within three years. The ultimate result became Meow Meow Productions and Teri Woods Publishing. Her novels, many of which are written as series – *True to the Game I* (2007), *II* (2007), and *III* (2008); *Deadly Reigns I* (2005) and *II* (2005); *Dutch I* (2003) and *II* (2005) – have amassed a loyal following and propelled Woods as one of the authorities on the plight of urban America. Her latest, *Alibi* (2009), remains grounded in urban suspense and survival. Teri Woods Publishing also provides opportunities for upcoming urban writers such as Shannon Holmes (*B-More Careful*, 2001), Kwame Teague (*The Adventures of Ghetto Sam/The Glory of My Demise*, 2003), Nurit Folkes (*Triangle of Sins*, 2004; *Rectangle of Sins*, 2005), and Eric Enck (*Tell Me Your Name*, 2004). Her success captured the attention of Warner Books, with which she signed a multimillion deal that included re-releasing *True to the Game* and its sequel in 2007 as well as releasing her latest, *True to the Game III* (2008) under the Grand Central Publishing imprint.

Woods's work is clearly entrenched in explicating familiar tropes of black criminality; yet, unlike her predecessors, including Beck and Goines, Woods seems comfortable with the milieu of the streets and characters reflecting the unfortunate circularity of criminality in the black community. However, one of the flaws of self-publishing, as well as of neophyte publishing houses such as Woods's, is the lack of quality copy-editing and unevenness in story development. Also, presumably Woods's marketing strategy to promote new writers is to utilize her name recognition as the publisher, which seems to be the trend among new black publishing houses in which the publisher is at least as important, if not more so, than the author. Woods's and Vickie Stringer's names are figured so prominently as publisher on the covers of their writers' books that the author becomes secondary.

Vickie Stringer started Triple Crown Publishers, named in homage to her former gang, Triple Crown Posse, in 2001 to self-publish her debut autobiographical novel, *Let That Be the Reason* (2001). Her work has been compared to the work of Donald Goines for its gripping story and verisimilitude. She has since published the novels *Imagine This* (2004) and *Dirty Red* (2006) as well as the how-to guide *How To Succeed in the Publishing Game* (2005). Unlike some of her contemporaries, Stringer's documented criminal history adds to her credibility as a street literature author and purveyor of new talent in the genre, making it clear that Triple Crown publishes "HIP HOP urban fiction"

exclusively. According to the company's official website, Stringer's Triple Crown Publishers has unveiled more than twenty-five authors, though many of them have published only one or two novels, inviting questions about quantity versus quality. However, in an ever-changing and sometimes over-crowded field of aspiring writers, urban novels that successfully mix literary craftsmanship and urban tropes are far and few between.

Two writers who began their careers at Triple Crown have now garnered the attention of mainstream publishers. K'wan (*Gangsta*, 2002; *Road Dawgz*, 2003) and Nikki Turner (*A Hustler's Wife*, 2002; *A Project Chick*, 2003) have become early legends in the urban literary scene not only for their novels, but also for their commitment to the hustle mentality delineated in their novels. K'wan's subsequent novels (*Street Dreams*, 2004; *Hoodlum*, 2005; *Hood Rat*, 2006; *Eve*, 2006; *Gutter*, 2008) have been published under the St. Martin's Griffin imprint, and he has also written a graphic novel for G-Unit/Pocket Books. Nikki Turner signed a publishing contract with Ballantine's One World imprint, not only for her work (*The Glamorous Life*, 2005; *Riding Dirty on I-95*, 2006; *Forever a Hustler's Wife*, 2007; *Black Widow*, 2008) but also as launch for her Nikki Turner Presents line of books. She has also published a novella, *Death before Dishonor* (2007), for G-Unit/Pocket. *Forever a Hustler's Wife* appeared on the bestsellers list of *Essence* and *USA Today*.

Many writers of urban fiction examine the black underworld as honestly as possible, exploring the repercussions of a life led on the streets. Even when characters abandon the underworld for more legitimate enterprises, their new lives are tethered to the underworld by their past entanglements. Readers are flocking to these novels for many of the same reasons that readers of the 1970s gravitated to Robert Beck and Donald Goines – to read books about their daily struggles by writers who have experienced that very struggle. The urban literary genre, then, despite flooding the market with poorly constructed tales, has its place in the African American literary tradition. It serves as a launching pad for those writers who are striving to produce quality material delineating the black inner city and black underworld communities, writers who are speaking for and to a sector of American society largely ignored by the American mainstream. However, while the success of urban literature proves that blacks can and do read, the literary community (readers and writers) must be aware that such consistent and innumerable variations on the theme of black criminality may actually reinforce, rather than refute, stereotypes.

Black writing, both canonical and popular, has addressed black sexuality since the emergence of the slave narrative, where examination of the black body as sexual and sexualized was necessary evidence of how miscegenation,

the production of the tragic mulatto, sexual violence, and the erotics of punishment function within the institution of slavery. Sandra Y. Govan's "Forbidden Fruits and Unholy Lusts: Illicit Sex in Black American Literature" explores the subtleties of the erotic, beginning with Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), tracing the erotic tradition from the novels of William Wells Brown and Harriet Wilson to contemporary fiction.¹⁷ For modern readers, how to distinguish between "erotica" and "pornography" may not constitute a problem, but such discrimination is of importance to critics who study literature and culture. The philosophical question is one of how the ontology of the erotic is something other than the urge toward sexual gratification and its various representations. The poet Audre Lorde proposed in "Uses of the Erotic" that the "erotic" is the "measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" and that pornography is "direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."¹⁸ It can be argued that so nuanced and succinct a distinction evinces the philosophical and cultural contexts for the making of erotic fiction.

The publication in 1992 of the groundbreaking anthology *Érotique noire, Black Erotica*, edited by Miriam DeCosta Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell, was a substantial challenge to twentieth-century taboos regarding the literary representation of black physical desire and sexual pleasure. One might claim, with appropriate caution and qualifications, that the anthology opened the floodgates for the now ever-expanding body of black erotic romances in American bookstores. *Érotique Noire* was a great popular success in the reclamation of the sexual in African American literature. Nevertheless, nearly five years passed before Reginald Martin's *Dark Eros: Black Erotic Writings* (1997) appeared.¹⁹ The publishing industry got the hint about an untapped black readership, and Rosemarie Robotham's *The Bluelight Corner: Black Women Writing on Passion, Sex, and Romantic Love* was issued in 1998. The intermixture of established and unknown writers in these anthologies made possible a very democratic interrogation of black sexuality from the intellectual to the deliberately seductive to the questionably pornographic.

In 2004, Gina Bellafante's "A Writer of Erotica, Zane, Allows a Peek at Herself" shed light on the enigmatic writer whose pseudonym has become synonymous with black erotic writing. Bellafante aptly refers to Zane as "giving voice to a new type of genre fiction: post-feminist African American erotica," as Zane has fashioned an astonishing oeuvre of novels and short fiction collections that center on the sexualities of "aspirational women."²⁰

When Zane self-published *The Sex Chronicles* in 1999, which was soon followed by her debut novel *Addicted* (2000), no one was quite prepared for the response. Zane led black erotica from the shadows into the clearing of the mainstream. *The Sex Chronicles* intersected with expanding attention to the category of the urban in African American culture, for in the text the hip-hop erotic seems to announce that inhabitants of the African Diaspora would wipe out in each lifetime all power to recollect the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century origins of black erotica in rural spaces, and instantiate concrete, skyscrapers, and oppression in terms of a warm, wet delta night. Zane's characters are decidedly and purposely upper middle class, or striving to become so, who can choose to have both comparably successful and lower-class black men as lovers. Thus, the hallmark of a Zane novel is ultimately choice – sexual and social. Yet, her work is not without its social relevance, as understanding the power of sexual choice is often dictated by overcoming social taboos and personal demons. For example, in *Addicted*, the main character is a sex addict who must enter counseling to repair the damage to her marriage. True love, not lust, which does not eliminate titillating sex scenes for readers, is the driving force in *Afterburn* (2005). Between novels, Zane continues to publish short fiction collections that include her work as well as launching the careers of new authors. Also, Zane's venture into the larger publishing arena has been equally successful; to date, Zane's Strebor Books International, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, has published 150 authors.

Carol Taylor's Brown Sugar series, published between 2001 and 2005, contributed greatly to the phenomenal growth of the readership for black erotic romances, each text in the series delving into various aspects of sexuality. The former book editor published the first of four erotic short fiction collections in 2001. *Brown Sugar: A Collection of Erotic Black Fiction* is a general offering of narratives; subsequent parts of the series, *Brown Sugar 2: Great One-Night Stands* (2002), *Brown Sugar 3: When Opposites Attract* (2003), and *Brown Sugar 4: Secret Desires* (2005), focused on specific situations. Her first novel, *The Ex-Chronicles* (2010), traces the sexual and social adventures of four thirty-something professional women in New York City.

To compete within an almost saturated market, writers are increasingly joining forces to produce novels, mini-anthologies, and novella collections, which takes some of the power away from scholars who compile such as a means of creating and sustaining current canons. Collaborations, therefore, have become both a staple and a force in African American publishing. With book sales down around the world and interest in celebrity and reality

television at its highest, it is a natural fit and a superior marketing tool to meld a celebrity who can write with writers who can embellish and edit. One can see at work here Sterling Stuckey's idea of communal work as a survival from the West African tradition practiced to lesser or greater degree by African Americans.²¹

Collaborations between authors within the African American literary tradition are not unprecedented. The growing field of children's literature (see Chapter 24) has brought visual artists together with writers in the same way that newer genres such as the graphic novel do.²² However, popular African American writers are uniting their talents with more frequency than in previous eras. By collaborating, more African American writers are allowed to establish an audience base as well as to bring a plethora of works to the reading public. Most of these novels are relationship-driven, while other works are propelled by celebrity status. Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant (*Tryin' to Sleep in the Bed You Made*, 2000; *Better Than I Know Myself*, 2004; *Gotta Keep on Tryin'*, 2008) and Angela Burt-Murray, Mitzi Miller, and Denene Millner (*The Vow: A Novel*, 2005) are among the most recognizable collaborations. Another development in African American popular culture is the return to the novella. Several novelists are expanding their audience base by cross-promoting their work with other novelists by publishing novellas with similar themes under one title. For example, Mary B. Morrison has collaborated with Carl Weber (*Lookin' for Love*, 2001; *Something on the Side*, 2008) for *She Ain't the One* (2006); Mary Monroe and Victor McGlothlin (*Autumn Leaves*, 2002; *What's a Woman To Do?*, 2003) collaborated on *Borrow Trouble* (2006). Victor McGlothlin and J. D. Mason resume the formula for *Sleep Don't Come Easy* (2008).

Two of the most popular stars of this genre are Blair Underwood and Karen Hunter. Underwood, best known as an actor, enlisted the talents of science fiction writers Tananarive Due and Steven Barnes for his debut novel *Casanegra* (2007) and its sequel, *In the Night of the Heat* (2008). The genre of co-authorships should not be confused with the as-told-to books, such as Dennis Rodman's *Bad As I Wanna Be* (1996). Karen Hunter, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is another significant name in this genre, having co-authored books with several famous celebrities turned writers, such as Cedric the Entertainer (*Grown-Ass Man*, 2002). She is best known for her work on celebrity memoirs by notables such as LL Cool J (*I Make My Own Rules*, 1997); Queen Latifah (*Ladies First*, 1998); talk-show host Wendy Williams (*Wendy's Got the Heat*, 2003; *The Wendy Williams Experience*, 2004); Reverend Al Sharpton (*Al on America*, 2003); Karrinne Steffans (*Confessions of a Video Vixen*, 2005); J. L. King (*On the Down Low*, 2004); and Pimpin' Ken (*Pimpology*:

48 *Laws of the Game*, 2007). She also co-authored her first novel, *Drama Is Her Middle Name* (2006) with Wendy Williams, and *Balancing Act* (2008) with Jonathan Plummer, as well as the exposé *Don't Blame It on Rio: The Real Deal Behind Why Men Go to Brazil for Sex* (2008) with Jewel Woods. In 2007, she launched Karen Hunter Publishing, an imprint of Pocket Books/Simon & Schuster.

Though Hunter, Stringer, and Woods are undeniably the stars of the independent black publishing industry, the industry is experiencing exponential growth. Nearly fifty black-owned presses are supporting black writers in a cross-section of genres, including mystery and relationships-driven fiction in addition to urban/street literature. Genesis, operating since 1993 from Columbus, Mississippi, is the largest privately owned African American book publisher in America. Milligan Books, or the Professional Publishing House, provides authors with a range of services from publishing support to marketing and sales; Milligan is considered the fastest-growing black female-owned publishing company in America. In addition, major publishing houses are capitalizing on the success of independent publishers. Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Random House, and Doubleday have created black imprints; Zane's Strebor Books is one of the most notable. Harlequin, a noted publisher of romance novels, distributes African American romance fiction through Kimani, Arabesque, Sepia, and New Spirit presses. What began as a trend in African American publishing is now commonplace and a welcome threat to mainstream publishers that have been forced to recognize an established, diverse black readership.

From its beginnings, the African American literary tradition has had a palpable conflict between canonical and popular literatures. Yet popularity is transient and is determined by the tastes of the reading public, which is greatly influenced by current social and political conditions. When popularity meets distance, the result is often canonization, as proven by the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The category "popular" is a legitimate though exceptionally problematic one in studies of African American literature and culture. Future studies of popular literature would profit from examining the reader as an active participant in creating literary history. What writers recognize in the current and emerging sub-genres of black popular fiction is how diverse narrative approaches embody a transition from a fixed conception of *the black experience* to multifaceted representations of *black experiences*. Black popular fiction, then, encourages new dialogues and perspectives, embraces new readers, and addresses the immediate needs of its varied readership.

Notes

1. Arthur Huff Fauset, "Intelligentsia," in Wallace Thurman (ed.), *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists* [1926] (New York: The Fire!! Press Reprint, 1985), pp. 45–46; p. 45.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
3. James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* [1927] (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 1–12; p. 8.
4. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" [1937], in David Levering Lewis (ed.), *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 194.
5. Candice Love Jackson, "The Literate Pimp: Reclaiming and Revisioning the Pimp-Authored Text," dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2004 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2004) p. 167.
6. *American Pimp*, dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, prod. Kevin Messich, Underworld Productions, 1998.
7. Jackson, *The Literate Pimp*, pp. 16–20.
8. Charles Johnson, "The End of the Black American Narrative," *The American Scholar* 7.3 (Summer 2008): 32–42; 33.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
11. Susanne Dietzel, "The African American Novel and Popular Culture," in Maryemma Graham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 156–170; p. 163.
12. Brian Aldiss, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: House of Stratus, 2001), p. 25.
13. Charles S. Saunders, "Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction," in Sheree R. Thomas (ed.), *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner, 2000), pp. 398–404.
14. Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 334.
15. Octavia Butler's Patternmaster series includes *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay's Ark* (1984). Xenogenesis, referred to as Lilith's Brood since 2000, includes *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Her most recent series is Earthseed, which includes *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).
16. David Wright, "Collection Development 'Urban Fiction': Streetwise Urban Fiction," *Library Journal* 131.12. (July 15, 2006), www.libraryjournal.com.
17. Sandra Govan, "Forbidden Fruits and Unholy Lusts: Illicit Sex in Black American Literature," in Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell (eds.), *Érotique Noire: Black Erotica* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 35–43.
18. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in DeCosta-Willis et al., *Érotique Noire*, pp. 78–83; p. 79.

19. Reginald Martin, *Dark Eros: Black Erotic Writings* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), p. xx. I am grateful to Professor Martin for his sharing of critical information about the problematic status of the erotic in the African American literary tradition.
20. Gina Bellafante, "A Writer of Erotica Allows a Peek at Herself," *New York Times*, August 22, 2004, p. 91.
21. Sterling Stuckey, *Going through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3–9.
22. The graphic novel is a more developed form of the comic book, usually treating more mature adult themes. African American authors often use the graphic novel as a medium to explore key social issues. A highly successful black and white graphic novel by Mat Johnson with artwork by Warren Pleece is *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* (2008), suggesting the possibilities of postmodern popular fiction.

Cultural capital and the presence of Africa: Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and the power of black theater

HARRY J. ELAM, JR.

Invariably, through time, black theater practitioners and critics have viewed the theater as a critical venue for affecting and effecting black cultural politics. W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke each proclaimed the need for a black-controlled theater to articulate a distinct black identity. Predating the ideological outlines of the 1960s "Black Aesthetic," Locke recognized the African presence in African American life and argued for a Negro art that pushed beyond established dramatic conventions. In his well-known manifesto for a Negro theater, Du Bois states that "a real Negro theatre" must be "About us, By us, For us, and Near us."¹ For Du Bois, theatrical representation is critical to the achievement of African American transformation and emancipation. Notably, Du Bois's call for a segregated black theater resonates in Amiri Baraka's 1965 radical proclamation "The Revolutionary Theatre" and August Wilson's speech to the 1996 Theatre Communications Group National Convention, "The Ground on Which I Stand." Baraka proclaims that the Revolutionary Theatre is "a political theatre, a weapon to help the slaughter of these dimwitted fatbellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on."² Aligning himself with the African American history of struggle and survival as well as the black tradition of a functional art of protest, Wilson states: "I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth."³ The strategies of Wilson, like those of Baraka, Du Bois, and Locke, reify the potential intersections of culture, power, and identity within the frame of theatrical representation.

The black playwright, therefore, as playmaker, engages in processes of writing and righting black experiences. With the act of creating characters and

putting them on stage, black playwrights most notably construct identities as they construct images of blackness that subvert, invert, and reinforce those operating within society. The embodied nature of theater, that it happens live in the performative now in front of an audience, have made it a form that functions in direct relation to the specific social and cultural circumstances of black lives. Thus, African American theatrical history concerns not simply the critical documentation of play texts in and across time and context, but also an examination of the performance and reception history. Who were the audiences and what was the relationship between the performance and that audience? In times of black social need and unrest, the theater has become a vehicle to express that frustration and even to visualize change. As African Americans have moved from Civil Rights to black power to post-race politics and the election of a black President, the theater has functioned as informative and informing barometer of these evolutions. Significantly, Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, two of the most important modern American playwrights, have demonstrated not simply the instrumentality of black theater but its ability to address the particular even as it speaks to greater cultural dynamics. These two playwrights, who both died too early from cancer – Hansberry at age thirty-four in 1965 (b. 1930) and Wilson at age sixty in 2005 (b. 1945) – harness the social power and cultural capital of theater to act as a regenerative agent and purposefully to connect African Americans with their African heritage, commenting on the past and present meanings of blackness as well as its possibilities.

With her first and most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry attracted new audiences to African American theater. Winner of the 1959 New York Drama Circle Critics Award as Best Play of the Year, *Raisin in the Sun* became the first play on Broadway by a black woman and the longest-running play by a black author, supplanting Langston Hughes's 1935 *Mulatto*. Audiences of inner-city blacks came to Broadway in unprecedented numbers; church groups from East Coast cities chartered buses to New York to see images of themselves reflected on the Broadway stage. At this moment in American history, as the country stood on the verge of the Civil Rights Movement, *Raisin* touched chords of commonality for white and black spectators as the struggle of a black family in Chicago around the importance of family unity and the viability of the American dream of upward mobility championed in the play. In the early 1940s, two others important plays about black inner-city Chicago families, *Big White Fog* (1938) by Theodore Ward (1902–83) and *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright and Paul Green, had been produced in New York, yet neither attracted the kind of cross-racial audience

support that *Raisin* did. In both cases their polemics influenced audience reception. *Big White Fog* critiques Garveyism and capitalism and points to Marxist socialism as offering the best solution to the "big white fog" of racism. Equally socialist in its leanings and based on the acclaimed novel by Richard Wright, the play *Native Son* similarly contests the American social system and holds it complicit in perpetuating a system of racial inequity. Interestingly, Hansberry had originally ended *Raisin* with an image of the black Younger family huddled with guns in the dark waiting for their white neighbors to attack. She eventually replaced that more bleak ending with the black family joyously preparing to move into the white neighborhood. Clearly, the commercial and critical success of *Raisin* might have been different if she had maintained the original.

Raisin in the Sun makes tangible the ways in which the lessons of the past impact the present through the image of the 10,000 dollar insurance check left to the Younger family by the deceased patriarch big Walter Younger. The family must determine what to do with their legacy and ultimately how to honor the father's memory. This matter of paternal inheritance incorporates much larger issues of race, class, and gender as Hansberry considers alternative visions of black masculinity, a new space for assertions of black feminism, and a purposeful connection to Pan-Africanism. Fundamentally, Hansberry contrasts the naive assertions that Walter Lee holds about American capitalism with those of Mama Younger, the family matriarch, whose vision of humanism ultimately triumphs. The play's dramatic tension takes shape as son is pitted against mother, reflecting both generational and ideological differences. More specifically, with its discussion of black liberation strategies, its interest in African politics, and its presentation for the first time of an Afro "natural" hairstyle on the American stage, Hansberry's *Raisin* functions as a precursor to the fiery black revolutionary dramas of the 1960s. Most fundamentally, the play reaffirms the resilience of the African American spirit to overcome, to transcend in the face of adversity.

Mama Younger, enriched by her personal experience with trials and tribulations of the black past, embodies the notion of perseverance in the present. She keeps the legacy of her deceased husband alive and serves as the protector and progenitor of the family's cultural heritage. In *Raisin*, it is Mama Younger who receives the insurance check, the symbol of the past's impact on the present, and who must determine how the money is disseminated. And yet, Hansberry constructs Mama not as affixed with the past, not simply a stubborn and emasculating matriarch, but rather as a representative of an evolving feminist consciousness. Mama Younger recognizes her past dictatorial ways

and learns to accept change in the present. She allows her daughter Beneatha's bourgeois proclivities and encourages her to become a doctor. She provides her son, Walter Lee, space in which to address his dreams, to acknowledge his family's struggle, and to realize his manhood.

Caught up in the American capitalist dream, Walter Lee associates the acquisition of wealth and property with manhood and masculinity. Living in a society that devalues black masculinity, Walter Lee attempts to define manhood in terms of white standards of affluence. The urbanite Walter Lee believes that owning a liquor store will make him a big man with access to power and possibility. When confronted by his mother and wife about his drive toward material possessions at all costs he responds, "Yes, I want to hang some pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tell me – tell me, who decides which women is suppose to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a *man* – and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world!"⁴ Walter Lee questions white privilege but lacks the political acumen to truly combat the system and its racial inequities.

Through the personal trial of Walter Lee, Hansberry both questions existing frameworks of manhood and masculinity and redefines them. In the end, Hansberry argues that manhood can be determined not by external acquisition but by internal pride, self-definition, and self-determination. A revised conception of black manhood emerges through a confrontation of practical and symbolic import with a white man. In the climactic moment of *Raisin*, after he has already squandered the bulk of the family's inheritance, Walter Lee stands up to Mr. Lindner, the white man who comes to offer him money not to move into the formerly all-white Clybourne Park. Walter rejects Lindner's offer, thereby asserting an alternative view of manhood, as his mother attests to his wife Ruth: "He finally come into his manhood today didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain."⁵ The climactic struggle brings new understanding to Walter Lee; the actual confrontation with white hegemony works to produce a liberatory definition of masculinity. In addition, it serves as a moment of communion for the family, reuniting them in the history of black commitment to endure and overcome as they go off to live in Clybourne Park.

In *Raisin*, Hansberry expands the realistic canvas of the play through her inclusion of African spirituality in an encounter between Walter Lee and his sister, Beneatha, sporting new African garb and new Afro hairdo. During the first scene of the second act, a frustrated Walter Lee Younger returns home drunk to find his sister Beneatha in the cramped living room, regally dressed in authentic African robes, her hair freshly coifed in a natural hairdo, dancing to the sounds of a "*lovely Nigerian melody*"⁶ on the record player. At first he views

her with disdain, but then he looks as if caught in another moment in time. Hansberry's stage directions here are particularly telling. She writes that he looks "*back to the past.*" ⁷ Some ten lines earlier, after Beneatha initially has placed the record on the turntable, Hansberry describes her disposition, "*Beneatha listens, enraptured, her eyes far away, her eyes far away – . 'back to the past.' She begins to dance.*"⁸ Hansberry unites brother and sister in a moment of atavistic communion as they conjure the spirits of Africa past.

Entranced by the music, emboldened by the liquor, Walter Lee climbs up onto the kitchen table, responding to the rhythm of the drums. "*Very far gone,*" Hansberry explains, "*his eyes pure glass sheets. He sees what we cannot, that he is leader of his people, a great chief, a descendant of Chaka, and that the hour to march has come.*" ⁹ Overcome by his vision of Africa and his newly discovered need to lead his people home, Walter Lee calls out to his gathered tribe that is at once his wife and sister, witnessing from the living room, and the audience, listening from their seats. Together brother and sister engage in a ritualistic, spiritual, dynamically political call-and-response that is a sign of African American religious traditions even as it signifies back on African retentions. "Listen my black brothers," he cries. "Ocomogosiay," Beneatha shouts in reply. ¹⁰ This collective cultural rite is at once inside and outside the action of the play. For it does not literally move the action of the play forward, but rather comments on the sociopolitical locations of its subjects and the significance of Africa within their contemporary context.

Recognizing that Africa has been pejoratively construed as the Dark Continent, a place of savages and missionaries, the product of derogatory stereotypes conveyed in the media, Hansberry seeks to redress such images through her representations of Africa in *Raisin*. Accordingly, before the visit of her Nigerian suitor, Asagai, Beneatha chastises her mother to reform her image of Africa:

MAMA: Well I don't think I never met no African before.

BENEATHA: Well, do me a favor and don't ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africans. I mean, do they wear clothes and all that –

MAMA: Well now, I guess if you think we so ignorant 'round here maybe you shouldn't bring your friends here –

BENEATHA: It's just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan –

MAMA: Why should I know about Africa?¹¹

Hansberry has Mama ask this question that perhaps many black members of her audience might ask. Hansberry had been exposed early to the Pan-African

struggle and understood its intrinsic link to African American liberation efforts; her uncle William Leo Hansberry, a famous African historian, had African leaders frequenting her house as she was growing up in Chicago. The presence of Asagai in the play, his proclamation of an African-based humanism, and his expressed desire to take Beneatha “home” with him to Nigeria, offers one answer to Mama’s question. Asagai woos Beneatha with the image of a highly gendered, very romanticized, long-overdue homecoming: “Three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors has come.”¹² The African Prince and the African American maiden conjure a storybook fantasy and reinforce a patriarchal hierarchy. At the same time, the quote is about recovery and retrieval, with Africa the promised land of return. African Americans must know and care about Africa, because Africa is the land of origin, the site of historic inception.

Hansberry provides another answer to Mama’s query through the shared ritual call-and-response of Walter Lee and Beneatha with Nigerian drums in the background. Within their ceremonial enactment, Africa is, in the words of Joseph Roach, “at once reinvented and remembered.”¹³ Picturing an African village where “you hear the waters rushing against the shores of the coastlands” and the “screeching cocks in yonder hills beyond where the chiefs council meet in council for the coming of the mighty war,” Walter Lee looks out and urges his imagined black brethren on to revolutionary insurgency.¹⁴ For Walter Lee and Hansberry, the Africa he conjures functions, as Gunilla Theander Kester suggests, “as a native soil and empirical abstraction and a metaphorical space.”¹⁵ The idea of Africa as metaphor enables it to be constructed, to be remembered within the context of the moment. Moreover, as metaphor, its utility lies beyond its geopolitical reality but rather in its symbolic significance. For Hansberry, the symbolic meaning of Africa is both past and present.

Despite its references to Africa and its predicting the advent of the Black Power Movement, proponents of the nascent black militant drama criticized the play. Amiri Baraka, for example, questioned the play’s impoverished class politics and its assimilationist embrace of integration. Baraka explains, “We thought Hansberry’s play was part of the ‘passive resistance’ phase of the movement, which was over the minute Malcolm’s penetrating eyes and words began to charge through the media with deadly force. We thought her play ‘middle class’ in that its focus seemed to be on ‘moving into white folks’ neighborhoods,’ when most blacks were just trying to pay their rent in ghetto shacks.”¹⁶ Years later, however, when he attended a revival of *Raisin* in 1986, Baraka had a quite different response to the play:

[In the 1960s] we missed the essence of the work – that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people. What is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry's play still remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality, and the masses of black people dug it true.¹⁷

Baraka now imagines the play as speaking specifically to the black liberation of its time and the continued social reality of African Americans. His shifting interpretation of *Raisin* speaks, however, as much to the changes in his own political philosophy. As such it equally evidences how much the reception of any play depends on the ideological baggage and cultural expectations that the audience themselves bring into the theater.

Hansberry's next play to reach Broadway, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), significantly challenged audience expectations even as it extended Hansberry's political agenda. Rather than focusing on black people or a black family, the play has only one black character. At the center of the play is Jewish liberal Sidney Brustein. Stuck within an ethical dilemma about how to confront the injustices around him, Sidney comes to the conclusion that inaction is in fact action and that he must take more definitive steps to affect change. Within this play and in all of her work – owing to her early death, Hansberry wrote only four complete plays – the personal links to the political. Her post-atomic war play *What Use Are Flowers?* (1962) uses the absurdist and avant-garde conventions to tell the allegorical story of a hermit and a group of children who are the only survivors of an unnamed holocaust. Decidedly optimistic in the face of oppression and war, within this bleak picture Hansberry presents not only a warning of nuclear catastrophe, but also a vision of hope for the future. Unlike *Raisin*, the reviews for both of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *What Use Are Flowers?* were mixed; the plays did not achieve commercial success. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* ran on Broadway for 101 performances but was kept alive only by a coterie of concerned theater practitioners as Hansberry lay on her death bed.

Hansberry's screenplay *The Drinking Gourd* (1960) had the potential to find a wide commercial audience. Originally the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) commissioned this teleplay from Hansberry to open a five-part series of ninety-minute television dramas commemorating the centennial of the Civil War. However, the network determined never to produce *Drinking Gourd* and to scuttle the series. Evidently, NBC deemed Hansberry's rendering of the "Peculiar Institution" too provocative to air. In *Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry confronts stereotypic representations of black women. She depicts how the

seemingly docile house slave Rissa becomes radicalized. The resolution of *Drinking Gourd* features Rissa and another slave woman armed and galvanized in a revolutionary consciousness, representing a stark contrast with the conventional image of slave womanhood. The decision to prevent *Drinking Gourd* from reaching a television audience speaks to the investment that key players at NBC had in preserving or protecting certain narratives of slavery. In 1960, on the eve of the struggle against segregation, NBC feared a backlash from its Southern affiliates if they aired Hansberry's play. Thus, *Drinking Gourd* had a powerful reception even as it never had an actual viewing audience. Hansberry's writing of and position on *Drinking Gourd* gives further evidence of her fierce independence as an artist in terms of form and content – she pushed the limits of what constituted African American theater – as well as her continued commitment to using theater and performance as a venue where she could impact thought, and potentially even influence social action.

Hansberry's last play *Les Blancs* (1969), set in the fictive African country of Zatembe on the eve of revolution, further extends her concern with connections between Africans and African Americans as it considers the blood politics of revolution. The play revolves around three brothers Abioseh, Tshembe, and Eric, who have different perspectives on and roles in the oncoming insurrection. The play asks how we are inherently connected to the past, to our familial and cultural histories. Produced posthumously, *Les Blancs* offers one of the clearest and most powerful discourses on the constructed "reality" and situational meanings of race. Throughout the play, Tshembe Matoseh and the white American liberal journalist Charlie Morris engage in a series of polemical debates on race. During one such encounter, the following discussion unfolds:

TSHEMBE: Race – racism – is a device. No more. No less. It explains nothing at all.

CHARLIE: Now what in the hell is that supposed to mean?

TSHEMBE: I said racism is a device that, of itself, explains nothing. It is simply a means. An invention to justify the rule of some men over others.

CHARLIE: But I agree with you entirely! Race hasn't a thing to do with it actually.

TSHEMBE: Ah – but it has!

CHARLIE: Oh, come on. Matoseh. Stop playing games! Which is it, my friend?

TSHEMBE: I am not playing games. I am simply saying that a device is a device, but that it also has consequences; once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he is a Moslem or a Christian – or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black – is suffering the utter reality of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't exist – merely because it is a lie!¹⁸

In this passage from *Les Blancs*, Hansberry theorizes that the meanings of race are conditional, that the illusion of race becomes reality through its application. Despite its being written forty years ago, this passage has a particular modern relevance. It locates the current debates over the definitions of race in decidedly and purposefully theatrical terms: "Race is a device."

Lorraine Hansberry's own life, her particular social location, significantly informs this understanding of race as social, cultural, and historical construction. Her mother and father, Nannie and Carl Hansberry, were prominent activists who challenged Jim Crow laws and racial segregation. When she was a child, black leaders such as Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes would visit the family home. Her father brought a suit to the Supreme Court against racial covenants in housing, and this informed the plot of *Raisin*. Through her association with her uncle, the renowned Howard University professor, she gained a deep appreciation for African struggles for independence, which informed her creation of the character Asagai in *Raisin* as well as her construction of the revolutionary urgency in *Les Blancs*. Moreover, her knowledge of Africa impressed on her the need for a Pan-African politics:

And I for one, as a black woman in the United States in the mid-Twentieth Century, feel that I am more typical of the present temperament of my people than not, when I say that I cannot allow the devious purposes of white supremacy to lead me to any conclusion other than what may be the most robust and important one of our time: that the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African peoples and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever.¹⁹

Evident here is Hansberry's recognition of an inherent connection between Africans and African Americans that influences not only how she feels about Pan-African liberation strategies but also how she imagines her own social location and identity. Also as indicated by the quote, Hansberry's life as her art very much concerned negotiating the relationship between the politics of race and of gender.

Significantly, in *Les Blancs* Hansberry consciously absents the figure of the black woman as she constructs her play for production. Hansberry, as Robert Nemiroff tells us in the published introduction to the text, originally conceived of *Les Blancs* as involving a sister as well as brothers: "Her [Hansberry's] earliest workbook jottings refer to 'the return of Candace for her mother's funeral' and the confrontation between her brother Shembe (as she spelled it then) and Abioseh over the funeral."²⁰ By the final Broadway draft Candace

disappears and the play involves the brothers Abioseh and Tshembe coming home for the funeral of their father. Consciously, Hansberry removes the black women but their trace is still felt, as the world of the brothers is so palpably male devoid of women.

By eliminating Candace and replacing the funeral of the mother with that of the father, Hansberry appears to bring a particular concern to patrilineage; how is the legacy of the father enacted or manifested in the sons? The older brother, Abioseh, has remained in Africa, in the fictive country Zatembe, and has become a novice priest in the Catholic Church. The focal character, Tshembe, on the other hand, has gone to study in England, married a white European woman, and fathered a child by her. And yet it is Tshembe, the prodigal son, who still holds on to the traditions of his father, while brother Abioseh disdains them as pagan practices. Tshembe refers to the insurgents against colonialism in Zatembe as "freedom fighters," and in contrast Abioseh identifies them, like the colonists do, as "terrorists." The divergent politics and internecine struggles of these brothers reflect the decidedly different ways that each views the legacy of the father, but also the import of the mother and the horrific circumstances of her death.

In an evocative move that probes the intersections of desire, responsibility, and insurrectionary urgency, Hansberry has Tshembe pursued by another woman. A black woman dancer, who symbolizes "Mother Africa," interrupts Tshembe's thoughts of his reunion with his white wife and son in England and calls him to revolutionary consciousness. As the woman dances to the pulsating beat of the African drums, Tshembe admits that this black woman has always been a rival for his affection. "I have known her to gaze up at me from the puddles in the streets of London; from the vending machines in the New York subway. Everywhere. And whenever I cursed her or sought to throw her off ... I end up in her arms!"²¹ The ubiquitous nature of this woman suggests that she is inescapable. The fact that this vision is sexualized implies that she, Mother Africa, is the subconscious object of his desire. She is the illicit demanding mistress, while the white wife is the relationship sanctioned, legalized by marriage. The need for African insurgency, for action against colonial legislation is represented by this woman's embrace and is made all the more critical by the present urgency in the country.

Relying on the audience's suspension of belief and the magic of theater, the dancer exists solely in Tshembe's mind. Although she appears on stage with both Tshembe and Charlie, Charlie cannot see her; she is visible only to Tshembe and to the audience. When Charlie questions Tshembe as to who he sees, he replies "Who! Who! When you knew her you called her Joan of Arc,

Queen Esther! La Passionara! And you did know her once, you did know her!"²² Tshembe associates his imagined black mistress with historic white European women who have led and championed revolutionary causes, such as Dolores Ibárruri – La Passionara, as she was called – who rallied the Spanish Communist party against anarchy in the 1830s. In this way, Hansberry refigures and empowers a different vision of femininity and womanhood and imagines it embodied by the black woman dancer. Yet, the fact that the black woman dancer is partially visible, seen only by Tshembe, that she is vocally silent but speaks loudly through her physical movement, represents a form of absent presence. She is both material reality and psychic image; she is a historic trace but also a substantive current figure. Tshembe struggles against her yet conjures her into being. Margaret Wilkerson writes, "the dancer's 'silence' actually emphasizes the emptiness of words."²³ Hansberry asks that the woman's dance become more urgent, insistent, and unrelenting as Tshembe questions his responsibility and his need to commit to the insurgency: "I have a wife and son now! I have named him Abioseh after my father and John after hers!"²⁴ Contrasting the powerful symbolic demand of this dancing black woman with the static internally conflicted figure of Tshembe, Hansberry posits the question of the role of women in the struggle: when does the allure of hearth and home cede to the necessity of revolutionary action?

More than just sanctioning insurgency, the end of *Les Blancs* asserts another value: the inevitability and necessity of revolution not just at the expense of sympathetic whites but even at the expense of family. In the act that marks the beginning of the rebellion and the end of the play, Tshembe shoots and kills his brother Abioseh, the reactionary Catholic priest who has attempted to betray the revolutionary cause as the third brother Eric heaves a hand grenade into the Mission. The act of fratricide suggests that, at certain critical moments, blood, family, must be sacrificed in the name of revolution. Unlike the South African example of democratic evolution, forgiveness, truth, and reconciliation, Hansberry paints a picture of change in Africa that can only come about through bloodshed. To be sure this is a troubled and troubling ending. Tshembe not only kills his brother but also forgoes the possibility of reuniting with his wife and son, perhaps forever. Mother Africa appears a cruel and demanding mistress. Yet even as the play disrupts the power of family, it reaffirms it. Haunted by the traumatic passing of his mother and the futile efforts toward social change of his father, Tshembe acts in their name. His revolt affirms their legacy.

Like these plays of Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson's work is very much concerned with the power of history and the linkages of an African

past to the American present. With two Pulitzer Prizes, two Tony Awards, and numerous other accolades, August Wilson stands out as one of the most significant playwrights of the late twentieth century in American theater. On October 17, 2005, nine days after his funeral, the Virginia Theater at 245 West 52nd Street in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theater, making Wilson the first African American to have a Broadway theater named in his honor. Wilson's self-imposed dramatic project was to review African American history in the twentieth century by writing a play for each decade. With each work, he recreates and reevaluates the choices that blacks have made in the past by refracting them through the lens of the present. Wilson focuses on the experiences and daily lives of ordinary black people within particular historical circumstances, carefully exploring the pain and perseverance, the determination and dignity in these black lives. Central to each play in Wilson's historical cycle is the concept that the events of the past can and do have a powerful impact on the present. Repeatedly in these plays, Wilson creates black characters who are displaced and disconnected from their history, from their individual identity, and are in search of spiritual resurrection and cultural reconnection. As a result, his characters must go backwards in order to move forward. Invariably the nature of this journey, for Wilson, involves rediscovering and reaffirming the Africanness in African American experience.

The trajectory of Wilson's construction of his cycle illustrates his own process of moving backwards in order to move forward. The manner in which he wrote the plays does not reflect a straight chronological progression from 1904 to 1997, but rather a journey of stops and starts. His historic hopscotch starts in the 1920s with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), but then leaps into the 1950s with the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* (1987). At that same moment when he is scripting *Fences*, he is stepping back into 1911 and completing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988). Subsequently, he pens *Piano Lesson* (1990), set in 1936, and then turns to *Two Trains Running*, (1993), his play of the 1960s. From the 1960s he pushes forward with his next play by going back to the 1940s and *Seven Guitars* (1995). The play of the 1980s, *King Hedley II* (1999), follows *Seven Guitars*, but precedes his writing of *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), set in 1904. And of course there is the case of *Jitney* (2000), his play of the 1970s, which Wilson first drafted in the 1980s but would return to in the 1990s with a new sense of how it fit within his overall dramaturgical project. Finally there is *Radio Golf* (2005), his play of the 1990s completed just before he died that same year. All of Wilson's dramas save for *Ma Rainey* are set in his childhood home, The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was not until

he was well into the cycle that Wilson himself recognized his historical mission. He states:

Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the important issues confronting Black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of Black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature.²⁵

If his plays are evidence of what Wilson terms a “record of Black experience,” they are a far from static record. They present a history that is in motion, a collective tale not simply of a singular black experience but of black experiences. He terms his project “a 400 year old autobiography, which is the black experience.”²⁶ As an African American “autobiography,” Wilson’s work links African American collective memory with his own memories and with his activist racial agenda. His family background and own life experiences are evident in this project. In his cycle of plays, Wilson does not simply review the past and reevaluate history. His project is so much more proactive as he makes black people not tangential to but central to the motion of history.

With the construction of his twentieth-century cycle, August Wilson changed American theater history. He was the most produced playwright in the 1990s, with productions at theaters across the country. As a consequence, his work has opened up doors for black artists, directors, actors, and designers to find professional opportunities in the theater. Moreover, his methodology for playmaking also disrupted the traditional channels for moving a play to Broadway. As a result of his relationship with Lloyd Richards, the first black director on Broadway who had first mounted Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* in 1959 and later become the Dean of the Yale Drama School (1979–91), Wilson would originate plays at the Yale Repertory Theatre or other regional theaters and then move them to regional theaters, changing and honing the plays along the way until they would ultimately reach New York. Through this process, Richards and Wilson created new alliances among regional theaters as well as a new interaction between the regional theater circuit and the commercial New York stage. Richards, who in 1983 discovered Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* when he served as director of the Eugene O’Neill Playwriting Festival, directed the first six of Wilson’s plays to come to Broadway. Their professional relationship ended in the mid-1990s. With the later four plays of the cycle, however, Wilson still continued this pattern of play production. As he discovered connections between his plays, he attempted in these final texts to unite this personal and collective history.

The critical figure mediating the power of history in the Wilson cycle as a whole is the character Aunt Ester, a woman as old as the African American presence in America.²⁷ Prior to her first appearance onstage in *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson originally mentions Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running* and then references her again in *King Hedley II*. In the final play of the series, *Radio Golf*, set in 1997, Aunt Ester's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh is scheduled for demolition as part of a redevelopment project. Born with the arrival of Africans in America, Aunt Ester is the actual site of African American legacy; history and memory commix in her body. In fact her name, in a riff of aural signifyin', sounds similar to "ancestor." "Aunt Ester" is in fact the "Ancestor," the connection to the African American past, which is both personal and collective, both material and metaphysical. Rather than abstract signifier, she is blood; she is family, the aunt of her people. By communing with Aunt Ester, others have the potential to rework their relationship to the past and find redemption. According to Wilson, "Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant person of the cycle. The characters after all, are her children."²⁸

Africanist allusions abound with Aunt Ester. Entrance to Aunt Ester's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh is through a red door and the color red for many Yoruba represents "the supreme presence of color."²⁹ Her "faith-based practice," her laying on of hands, has a direct relationship to the Yoruba goddess Oshun or Osun, one of the wives of the powerful thunder god Shango, who when she died fell to the bottom of the river and became the divinity of the rivers. At the festival for the river goddess Oshun at Oshogbo in Nigeria, the celebrants praise her by throwing "flowers into her stream."³⁰ In keeping with the water goddess's realm of authority, Aunt Ester asks all those who come to her for counsel to throw their offering into the river. Her city, Pittsburgh, is known for its three rivers, the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. Oshun is a generous spirit of wisdom and generosity. Known occasionally as the Yoruban "love goddess", she controls all that makes life worth living, such as marriage, children, money, and pleasure.³¹ Correspondingly, Wilson's characters come to Aunt Ester when they have trouble over such issues. Going to see Aunt Ester requires faith and the engagement of their inner eye. They then come to reconstruct their physical reality and to see the world anew.

In the earlier plays, where she is not physically present, Aunt Ester does not dictate a course of action; she asks that her parishioners be proactive in their own lives. Holloway, the old, wizened regular at the character Memphis's restaurant in *Two Trains Running* scolds the undertaker Mr. West, who is more interested in capitalism than spirituality: "That's what your problem is. You

don't want to do nothing for yourself. You want someone else to do it for you. Aunt Ester don't work that way. She say you got to pull you part of the load."³² Aunt Ester does not act for the souls who seek her counsel, but rather enables them to determine their own way. She explains to the troubled traveler Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean*, before she guides him on his journey to the powerful, mystical City of Bones, that she could "take him to that city, but you [he] got to want to go."³³ Aunt Ester dispenses advice in parables that compel her supplicants to interpret them, to think and then to act. The spiritual and practical healing that she initiates is internal and psychological. She does not provide salve for the external wounds of oppression and racism. "She make you right with yourself."³⁴ Only by being touched by the past, by re-membering the lessons of the ancestor, can the characters move forward. The African spiritualism conjoins with the practical American reality.

Aunt Ester's death in *King Hedley II* reverberates loudly. It creates fissures within the community, and constitutes a loss of history that requires its own healing. She dies of grief due to the desperate conditions of African American life in the 1980s. More than a testimony to the benign neglect of the Reagan-Bush administration or the power of external forces corrupting African American existence, her death marks the continued movement of blacks away from their "songs." What happens when the spirit of a people passes away, when Aunt Ester, the living symbol of the past, the "ancestor," or Aunt Ester of all African America, dies? Wilson foregrounds Aunt Ester's death visually and aurally. It causes all the lights to go out in the Hill district of Pittsburgh. A voice-over news flash tells of her passing. Stool Pigeon, a seemingly mad character with unique connection to history and spirituality, reports that crowds are lined up inside of Aunt Ester's house and outside on the streets below. Following the African tradition, they will remain with the body until she is buried and crosses over to the world of the ancestors. The death of Aunt Ester means the evacuation of spirit; Stool Pigeon's rituals over her deceased black cat's grave at the culmination of the play are intended to revive and renew this spirit. As Wilson suggests, through these ceremonies performed by Stool Pigeon at her cat's gravesite, Aunt Ester's is a soul we cannot afford to let die. Her death signals the urgent need for an immediate infusion of social change; it is a call for African American rebirth and reconnection. Her voice – eventually heard in her cat's meow at the play's conclusion – cries out loudly from the grave. The spirit cannot die but must find resurrection through rites of faith and through a ritual return to the past.

In the next play that Wilson writes after *King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester is quite literally reborn. Wilson brings a 285-year-old woman onto

the stage. For Wilson, her power does not simply emanate from her previous disembodiment. She is far from a static site of remembrance. She is a living force, actively urging spiritual and cultural change. She is a conjure woman with spiritual power and otherworldly authority. She is a woman who has loved and lost, who has been married and given birth. Not unlike Mama Younger in *Raisin in the Sun*, Aunt Ester embodies not only a collective history but also a personal one. (Interestingly, the actor Phylicia Rashad won a Tony Award for her portrayal of Mama in the 2004 Broadway revival of *Raisin*; the next year she was again nominated for a Tony for her role as Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean*.) Aunt Ester's knowledge is an embodied knowledge that she shares with others. Her point of reference is the past. History and remembrance become a force of authority to enable change in the present and to precipitate an understanding of present circumstances. Her embodiment makes the metaphysical an element of the everyday, and this is critical to Wilson and his drama. Aunt Ester is not merely a spirit unseen but a material force. Her actions have weight.

History provides both background and foreground for Wilson as he sets his plays at critical moments of historic transition, significant periods of liminality for his characters and for African Americans. With *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, his first play to reach Broadway, the time is 1927, a moment when the popularity of the African American rural blues of Ma Rainey was phasing out, to be replaced by the up-tempo jazzier sounds and urban dance rhythms of Bessie Smith. He begins *Fences* in 1957, just after the 1954 Brown versus the Board of Education decision on separate and equal education and just before the Memphis Garbage Strike and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This play about a black family in late 1950s Pittsburgh has many resonances with Hansberry's play *Raisin* set in late 1950s Chicago, with their messages of black determination to rise above racially constrained social circumstances. Wilson ends *Fences* in 1965 at the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, which would galvanize the social sentiments of people, capture the attention of a nation. Wilson sets *Two Trains Running* four years later, in 1969 – a time of social upheaval, as efforts raged against the war in Vietnam and student activism escalated on college campuses, and a time of black revolutionary fervor as black liberation strategies evolved from the integrationist and non-violent paradigms of Civil Rights into the violent, radical separatism of Black Power. He locates *Two Trains Running* in a small Pittsburgh restaurant that is at once within as well as outside of the pressing urgencies of these times. The shop must be torn down as part of the process of urban renewal. Outside its confines, a funeral for the fictitious Prophet Samuel and a rally for the real

slain black leader Malcolm X are held. Inside the shop, the characters confront issues of black identity and black power, black capitalism, and patriarchal hegemony. The play is at once timely and timeless, operating within a specific historical context and at the same time commenting on the present. Here and throughout the cycle as a whole the liminality of the times provides a metaphor for the characters' own dilemmas and developments. The characters and Wilson's dramaturgy are at once within and outside of history.

In each work, this liminality figures prominently. Characters have unfinished business, unresolved issues with the past, with their history. In *Ma Rainey*, the piano player Toledo chastises the other band members and declares that the colored man is "A leftover from history."³⁵ The concept of being a "leftover" places African Americans outside the trajectory of white American history. Toledo goes on to ask, "Now what's the colored man to do with himself?"³⁶ This question is critical not only to this play but to the cycle as a whole, as it is to Hansberry's work as well. At issue in these works is not simply what blacks have suffered under white oppression, but how black people will act in their own self-interest. Self-determination becomes a critical objective identified and advocated by these authors in their plays.

For Wilson, like Hansberry in *Raisin*, self-determination connects with the notion of defining alternative images of black masculinity. Often this is represented by ritualized acts of self-definition and resistance. A noted example of this occurs in the final climactic scene of *The Piano Lesson*, when the protagonist Boy Willie decides to confront the ghost of the deceased former slaveowner Sutter. Set in Pittsburgh in 1936, *The Piano Lesson* – in a way similar to *Raisin* – explores questions of personal and cultural inheritance. According to Wilson, "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?"³⁷ In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson replaces the present/absent father figure of *Raisin*, Big Walter, with an inanimate object, a piano. It is around this piano that questions of the past's impact on the present are contested. Boy Willie intends to sell the piano in order to buy land where his father worked as a sharecropper and his grandfather as a slave. His sister Berniece, on the other hand, believes that this piano, for which her father gave his life, must be kept in the family and can never be sold. The argument between brother and sister plays out as a dialectical debate for which the audience must construct a synthesis. Wilson creates convincing and rational arguments on both sides of the divide. The ideological separation of Boy Willie, the Southern brother, from Berniece, the Northern sister, becomes the site for a practical, spiritual, and ontological reconnection. As they actively and literally wrestle with ghosts from the past, Boy Willie and Berniece both gain in terms of their own

self-awareness, their collective identity, and their ability to define and determine their own destiny as African Americans.

Wilson believes that the encounter between Boy Willie and the ghost of Sutter is the most pivotal moment in the play, for at this moment Boy Willie does not fear death or the supernatural presence of Sutter; rather he is willing, able, and psychologically prepared for battle. According to Wilson, "It's really unimportant what happens to the piano, the important thing is that Boy Willie engages the ghost in battle."³⁸ Wilson envisions Boy Willie's ability to wield the "power" of death, the power to die or even to kill, as a critical strategy of black resistance in the struggle against white oppression. Rather than submit to the continued threat embodied in the haunting presence of Sutter, Boy Willie charges up the stairs to challenge his ghost. As Wilson notes, "He's [Boy Willie] not running out the door, he's not relying on Jesus, he's not relying on anything outside of himself."³⁹ For Wilson, the piano is ultimately, then, a conduit that facilitates or even foments this articulation of Boy Willie's subjectivity and African American political agency. Symbolically, Boy Willie battles the vestiges of the slave past that still haunt the African American present. Rather than submit to the white father, the absence/presence that "ghosts" his existence, he fights back.

Through Boy Willie's willingness to combat white hegemony, Becker's decision to fight Urban Renewal in *Jitney*, and Memphis's demand for his fair price in *Two Trains Running*, Wilson re-presents and re-organizes the problematic and problematized nature of black masculinity in acts of responsibility to self and the surrounding community. In each of these moments, the male figure comes to a new understanding of himself in relationship to structures of power and systems of privilege. Wilson presents this dynamic of black male empowerment through divergent images of black men, of different ages and of different historical circumstances. As Keith Clark argues, by depicting black men in a community of black men, "Wilson's plays foreground multiple conceptions of gender that are often contradictory or conflicting."⁴⁰ Consequently, his portrait of black masculinity is not a static one. In his plays, black men, marked by their experiences, devalued by society, negotiate with each other and with the world around them as they attempt to reclaim their legacy.

Wilson believes that in order for African Americans to feel truly liberated in the American context, they must rediscover their "African-ness." "One of the things I'm trying to say in my writing is that we can never begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans."⁴¹ Significantly, he recreates ritualistic moments in his works that function as both endings and beginnings

that unite past and present and symbolically connect the African to the African American. Wilson creates circumstances not only conducive to ritual action but where the invocation of rites becomes a practical response. Like the moment in *Raisin* where Walter Lee and Beneatha perform an African call-and-response, these are moments that expand the realistic canvas of the plays. Accordingly, such a moment of redemptive, ritualistic action that transgresses realism occurs at the end of *Fences* through the final transcendent act of Gabriel Maxson, the brother of the play's recently deceased problematic patriarch Troy Maxson. Gabriel has suffered a traumatic head injury during the Second World War and, with a metal plate in his head, functions at a diminished mental capacity. He believes he is the Archangel Gabriel and thus represents the earthly embodiment of heavenly power. At the end of the play, Gabriel summons his special faith to literally and symbolically open Heaven's gates for his brother Troy on the day of Troy's funeral. His actions proclaim a new day for Troy and the Maxson family. In addition, Gabriel's ritualistic and spiritual enactment exhibits a syncretic cosmology, the presence of African tradition within New World religious practice. Prior to opening Heaven's gates, Wilson writes that Gabriel endures "a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand."⁴² Because Gabriel wholeheartedly believes he is the Archangel Gabriel, his will is resolute. Gabriel invokes a racial memory, an African inheritance. His actions again reinforce the impact of the past on the present as the family's African heritage provides a benediction for their African American present.

Wilson's later works, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *King Hedley II*, and *Gem of the Ocean* also feature similar rituals of religious syncretism. The climactic, ritualized events that end *Joe Turner* present to the spectator personal and collective dynamics of blood sacrifice. Herald Loomis, the alienated, dislocated central figure, like his Wilsonian "brother" Gabriel, might be considered "crazy" and outside the constraints of normalcy. Certainly, at this ultimate climactic moment, Herald is psychologically and spiritually bereft, driven to the point of desperation, and overwhelmed by the haunting forces of his past, his righteous, runaway wife Martha, his faith in Christianity, his seven-year imprisonment by Joe Turner. The circumstances create a context of crisis demanding ritual redress. Brandishing a knife Loomis slashes his chest and bleeds for himself. Rejecting Martha's pleas, Loomis asserts, "I don't need anybody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself."⁴³ His act is unmediated, self-initiated, and self-defining. His bleeding makes literal what is metaphorical in the Christian Communion service. And yet his "real" act is both figurative in its theatrical manifestation

and symbolic in its meaning. It is a resolute act of will. As he cuts and marks himself physically, he liberates himself from his previous debilitating psychological marking as one of Joe Turner's niggers. "I'm standing now!",⁴⁴ he exclaims. Through this act he is born anew, "Heralding" a new day for himself and for African Americans.

In a demonstration of self-determination, Wilson in his twentieth-century cycle rejects the passive restraints placed on blacks by Christianity. His young, fiery, tormented black male protagonists, Levee in *Ma Rainey*, Boy Willie in *Piano Lesson*, and Loomis in *Joe Turner*, all lash out against conventional Christianity and its failure within their own experience. Accordingly, Loomis's bloodletting symbolically inverts the Christian sacrifice where Christ bleeds for the sins of the world. Loomis bleeds for himself. Significantly, Joe Turner captured Herald Loomis while Herald was attempting to spread the Christian gospel as a Deacon in the Abundant Life Church. His years of bondage have turned him away from Christianity. Prior to his self-scarification, his just-discovered wife Martha calls out to him to return to the church and give his soul to the Lord. "You got to look to Jesus. Even if you done fell away from the church you can be saved."⁴⁵ His response to her rejects the validity of Christian salvation and the inherent racism within the dogma of Christianity. "Great big old white man ... you Mr. Jesus Christ."⁴⁶ In this powerful and passionately ritualistic scene Martha and Loomis engage in a call-and-response interchange that challenges the authority of the Holy Ghost and the traditional rituals of prayer practices within Christian religion. Through this visual, aural, and spiritual moment, Wilson infuses the Christian with the African. Loomis steps out of the boarding house and into a new beginning, but in so doing he looks back to Africa. This Africa is a metaphoric site, "always and already a site of cultural crossing." As Sandra Richards notes, "The Africa that Wilson would have black Americans embrace is first an internal site of self-possession and agency."⁴⁷ By finding the god within, Loomis journeys to Africa. He leaves with new knowledge that is gained by his revolutionary action. Throughout Wilson's cycle, crises within the practical world are resolved in the realm of the symbolic. Ritualized acts bring together spirit and body and Africa serves as spirit and flesh, figurative and actual, past and future. Wilson's Africa, like that of Lorraine Hansberry, is a particular site of potential regeneration and change.

Hansberry and Wilson, separated by decades, are united in their belief in the cultural capital of the theater. While both of these playwrights recognize the social conditions that impact and constrain black lives, they use the power of theater to remind us that the battle to remove the psychological and

material shackles of black oppression is not simply an external struggle but an internal one. These playwrights ask what actions African Americans can take in the present that will change their future. How are black people to redefine themselves and determine their own history? These two playwrights have imagined and have utilized theater as a dynamic cultural agent capable not only of putting the past in productive dialogue with the present but of representing the resilience of spirit within African Americans in ways that continue to resonate. Their depictions of black lives demand rereadings.

And yet, as evidenced by the commercial success of Hansberry's and Wilson's work, the cultural capital, the cultural status and power of theater within the black community, is a contested and even contradictory space. *Raisin in the Sun* remains one of the most produced plays in the African American canon. Its 1984 Broadway revival, featuring Sean "P-Diddy" Combs along with Phylicia Rashad, again brought new audiences to Broadway – those familiar with the hip hop icon Combs and perhaps not with Hansberry's play. Wilson, the most produced playwright in the 1990s, may well be the most produced playwright of the first decade of the new millennium, with major productions of his works at the Signature Theatre in New York in 2008, and the 2009 revival of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at Lincoln Center, Wilson's favorite and most non-realistic Africanist play in the cycle. The *Joe Turner* revival, attended by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, marks the first time a major Wilson play in New York has been staged by a white director, Bartlett Sher. Even with the attendance of the first black President of the United States, audiences for this *Joe Turner* were mostly white. In fact, the commercial success of *Raisin* or the Wilson cycle necessarily means that they have generated crossover audience appeal, found white spectatorship, and moved away from Du Bois's perspective in 1926 that black theater be "near us" and "for us." Moreover, the politics of Broadway are such that the spectatorship is defined not simply by race but by class and by cultural sensibility. Going to a Broadway play necessitates not merely being able to afford the ticket but believing that this is something that you have access to and that you feel empowered to attend. As a consequence, members of the black middle or upper classes with previous experience of play-going are more likely to visit Broadway even with P-Diddy in the starring role. With the black masses there is a higher probability that they have witnessed the highly popular plays of the Urban Circuit, are more likely to know impresario Tyler Perry than August Wilson. Consequently, the achievement of economic success in the mainstream of American theater means proportionally limiting

one's accrual of cultural capital as well as one's ability to apply social critique. Finding space within the conventional American theater for the advocacy of black theater and for harnessing its power, as both August Wilson and Lorraine Hansberry desired, remains extremely complex.

Notes

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4. Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*, in *Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), Act 3, p. 123.
5. *Ibid.*, Act 3, p. 130.
6. *Ibid.*, Act 2.1, p. 64.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, Act 2.1, p. 65.
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13. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 27.
14. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*, Act 2.1, pp. 66–67.
15. Gunilla Theander Kester, "Approaches to Africa: The Poetics of Memory and the Body in Two August Wilson Plays," in Marilyn Elkins (ed.), *August Wilson: A Casebook* (New York: Garland Press, 1994), pp. 105–122; p. 108.
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18. Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, in Robert Nimeroff (ed.), *The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*. (New York: New American Library, 1983), Act 2.2, pp. 121–122.
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20. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
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 25. Kim Powers, "An Interview with August Wilson," *Theatre* 16.1 (Fall/Winter 1984): pp. 50–55; p. 52.
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 27. Parts of the next section on August Wilson have been adapted from Harry J. Elam Jr., *The Past Is Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).
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 32. August Wilson, *Two Trains Running* (New York: Plume Press, 1993), Act 2.1, p. 76.
 33. August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), Act 2.1, p. 53.
 34. Wilson, *Two Trains*, Act 1.1, p. 22.
 35. August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in *Three Plays by August Wilson*, (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), Act 1, p. 46.
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 37. Quoted in Hillary DeVries, "A Song in Search of Itself," *American Theatre* (January 1987): 22–26; 25.
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 43. Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, in *Three Plays*, Act 2.5, p. 287.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
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African American literature: foundational scholarship, criticism, and theory

LAWRENCE P. JACKSON

In 1899 during a lecture at a famous New York hotel, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) responded with pain to a reporter’s question. “We must write like white men. I do not mean imitate them, but our life is now the same ... I hope that you are not one of those who would hold the negro down to a certain kind of poetry – dialect and concerning only scenes on the plantation.”¹ Dunbar’s words resonated for most African Americans who possessed the literacy and leisure necessary to produce poetry and prose toward the end of the Victorian era and on the verge of the explosion of artistic modernism in the United States. For this group, the critical strictures and proprieties of Edwardian era literary expression were remarkably straightforward – and desirable. Another more critical member of Dunbar’s peers, Victoria Matthews, coined the term Race Literature at the turn-of-the-century Conference of Colored Women in the United States, hoping that the efforts written by a new generation of black writers would “utterly drive out the traditional Negro in dialect, – the subordinate, the servant as the type representing a race whose numbers were far into the millions.”² The black critical voices embarrassed by the clownish, lascivious, and primitive minstrel stereotypes dominated the small network of African American journals, newspapers, and often denominational colleges at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But these same African American critics were remarkably complex modernists, often urban and cosmopolitan, and they sought to create new artistic dimensions that drew upon a folk bedrock. At the end of the First World War, thirty-six-year-old Benjamin Brawley (1882–1939), a professor at Morehouse College in Atlanta, accepted the principles of the Victorian era critics – his prime concern was the identification of beauty – but disagreed with Dunbar that to write with beauty meant that the black artist had to take

on the style and theme of the whites. Brawley invoked Edgar Allen Poe's "The Poetic Principle" to identify the creation of beauty as a "large and fundamental truth," but Brawley, who had degrees from Morehouse, University of Chicago, and Harvard, was optimistic regarding the possibility of autochthonous black excellence. He suggested that "any distinction so far won by a member of the race in America has been almost always in some one of the arts" and that "any influence so far exerted by the Negro on American civilization has been primarily in the field of aesthetics."³ To Brawley's formally trained peers the assertion that African Americans had somehow shaped the standards of American artistic taste perhaps seemed outrageous, and Brawley was a bit more vanguard than he is typically given credit for. His reflection was grounded in the regular expressive sense of the black working woman and man, people who seemed to him to "insist" upon adornment. "The instinct for beauty insists upon an outlet, and if he can find no better picture he will paste a circus poster or a flaring advertisement on the walls," confided Brawley in 1918.⁴ Black peasant folk could appreciate *Faust*, he wagered, because the pageantry of the mythic characters and their effusive red costumes appealed to a native African American sense of chic. Brawley had of course emerged intellectually during an era committed to permanent, biologically transferred racial characteristics, but his thoughts about a black talent for creativity and distinctive standards of taste and beauty obtained their real inspiration from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigration patterns and shifts he had observed in American culture.

But there is something deeper than sensuousness of beauty that makes for the possibilities of the Negro in the realm of the arts, and that is the soul of the race. The wail of the old melodies and the plaintive quality that is ever present in the Negro voice are but the reflection of a background of tragedy. No race can rise to the greatest heights of art until it has yearned and suffered. The Russians are a case in point. Such has been their background in oppression and striving that their literature and art are today marked by an unmistakable note of power. The same future beckons to the American Negro.⁵

After the end of the First World War, the modernist tendency toward breaking with artistic orthodoxy and securing inspiration from popular culture enabled new confidence for the critics, who were now taking their inspiration regularly from the field of music. They knew that Harry Burleigh had collaborated with Antonin Dvořák in the creation of the *New World Symphony No. 9* in 1893. They had mulled over Du Bois, the erudite professor who had written in the 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* that the

Negro had contributed original music – slave songs – to American culture, and that blackness in and of itself was no cause for embarrassment. By 1922, James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), in his “Preface” to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, could gesture with excitement to black special contributions and sources of distinction. He reminded his audience that the African American signature on popular culture was so widely known as to have become anonymous. “Probably the younger people of the present generation do not know that Ragtime is of Negro origin,” reminded Johnson.⁶ Johnson suggested that the originality was cultural and would not remain fastened only to music. He claimed that black Americans were the possessors of a “transfusive” quality – an ability which allowed blacks to adapt to an environment and “suck up the national spirit from the soil and create something artistic and original.”⁷ Consequently, Johnson thought of black American writers as having the potential to become voices for all Americans. Writers needed to follow the success of the popular musicians who had created in ragtime and in the dance crazes a “touchstone” or “magic thing” that easily outstripped race prejudice.⁸ “What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation.”⁹ “Symbols from within” of course implied internal standards of taste and beauty, predicated upon the black body, black language, and black heritage as its natural zenith. If Johnson saw the issue with arch sensitivity, relative to an appraisal of black culture, he promoted the value of artistic activity in the same terms as Britain’s nineteenth-century headmaster Matthew Arnold. “The final measure of the greatness of all peoples,” he intoned, “is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.”¹⁰

The Rhodes Scholar and professor of philosophy Alain Locke (1885–1954) endorsed Johnson’s point of view for an African American aesthetics in 1925 with his essay “The New Negro.” In the work, published in *Survey Graphic* and later that year as an edited volume, Locke, a man who was not known for his boldness or originality, had asserted that black Americans had a unique artistic expressive gift and that their tastes had roots in Africa, which was no source of shame. Reaching quickly for the spirituals as his evidence, Locke pointed to “the courage of being natural” as the goal and “the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority” as the poison.¹¹ Just as importantly, he opened up the literary and aesthetic standards by gently chiding the Edwardian era critics that the stereotype that they feared – “the Old Negro” – of dialect and caricature, “more of a formula than a human being,” no longer existed.¹²

The next year George Schuyler (1895–1977), a kind of defrocked socialist and born-again muckraker styling himself after H. L. Mencken, posed the question whether blacks had anything at all to distinguish them from whites. In an article in *The Nation* called “The Negro-Art Hokum,” Schuyler brashly insisted that “the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon,” and where the spirituals, jazz, or the Charleston dance could be identified, “these are contributions of a caste in a certain section of the country.”¹³ Probably a week later, Langston Hughes (1902–67), barely twenty-four and putting on critical spectacles for the first time, wrote a more accurate assessment of what was really taking place for writers of narrative and poetry. Part Samuel Taylor Coleridge, part Bessie Smith, Hughes wrote well beyond Schuyler’s exacting concerns. He identified the barbed-wire necklace of Nordic imitation that had seemed a smooth gem in Dunbar and Matthews’s time. Hughes rejected trying to write in the manner of whites. “[I]t is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful!’”¹⁴ Hughes had sided with Johnson and Locke, but clearly the new problem would be a satisfying definition of “Negro.”

By the time of the Depression there were four African Americans holding Ph.D.s in English. Three of them taught at the Howard University English department: Charles Eaton Burch, Otelia Cromwell, and Eva B. Dykes. Burch was a specialist on Defoe, and Dykes would go on to write a book recovering attitudes toward blacks and abolitionist sentiment in the works of the Augustan and Romantic poets. As critics, they had not got to the point of taking James Weldon Johnson or Alain Locke very far, by either endorsing black speech, rhythm, and ‘transfusiveness,’ or celebrating the power of New Negroes. But they had begun collecting some black writers for an anthology, an endeavor that inevitably recognized the existence of a tradition. In 1932, Cromwell and Dykes and the linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, who specialized in African survivals in African American speech, published a nearly 400-page anthology of black writing, *Readings from Negro Authors for Schools and Colleges*.

The response of their younger colleagues showed the flowering of the critical tradition. John Lovell (1908–74), a twenty-something at work on a Cal Berkeley Ph.D. who would go on to occupy one of the coveted positions in the Howard English department, reviewed the prestigious book as flawed document. Claiming that his generation was “the first to *study* ‘Negro Literature’ in the light of modern research,” Lovell politely recoiled against the sensibility that sought to create a canon of black writers that stressed their

similarity to white Victorians. Lovell seemed quite close to the iconoclastic Zora Neale Hurston when he commented that the anthologists had eliminated "[t]he jungle music and splay of orgiastic festival, the Negro's original heritage ... the abandoned delight and wonder resultant from the clash of his civilization with another," in favor of the "purely imitative" and "'finished' pieces."¹⁵ Lovell was an odd sort of vanguard critic; he did not quibble with the editors for removing the "bafflingly incoherent" modernists, or the Marxists with a "particular slant of realism," he noted in his first review.¹⁶ However, he insisted upon stylistic masterpieces drawn from within the idiom of African American life. The anthologies would be inept and without a "genuinely finished literature" until the black writer developed "from the rich materials of his own tradition."¹⁷

The most important critical work of the 1930s was written, and with regularity, by the English professor and poet Sterling Brown (1901–89). Brown continued the ideal of developing an indigenous standard for criticism but he added to his tasks the difficult work of identifying the inadequate portraits of black Americans by whites. One of the chief results of the Harlem Renaissance had been white writers getting into print and making their reputations by digging into Negro subject matter. The process infuriated Brown. It had played out ten years earlier on Broadway and ten years before that with ragtime and Dixieland jazz music. Over and again, throughout his career, such as in the introduction to the collection *The Negro Caravan*, Brown averred, "Negro authors ... must be allowed the privilege and the responsibility of being the ultimate portrayers of their own."¹⁸

Brown helped the critical efforts best by upholding barriers against white writers seeking to carry over the minstrel tradition. In 1933 Brown published a landmark essay in Howard's *Journal of Negro Education* called "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors." His report captured not just the new defiance of black intellectuals and their rejection of patronage. In the essay Brown exposed an entire stratum of American literature as being completely false to black life. He dismissed as especially harmful the Roark Bradfords of the world, who qualified the accuracy of their assertions regarding black Americans on the basis of their birth on plantations worked by slaves and their being tended to by black mammys. "All this, he believes, gives him license to step forth as their interpreter and to repeat stereotypes in the time-hallowed South," began Brown. "It doesn't."¹⁹ Instead of realistic portraits of black life, Brown identified seven recurring stereotypes: contented slave, wretched freeman, comedian or buffoon, brute, tragic mulatto, "local color" negro, and "exotic primitive."²⁰ His catalog would be revisited, revised, and

enumerated by most of the major critics of African American literature in the twentieth century. But it was never surpassed.

Brown showed genuine frustration toward the conclusion of the essay and the final example of a stereotype, the exotic primitive. He included Carl Van Vechten among the culprits, despite his high visibility as a supporter of African American writing and culture, especially during the 1920s. Instead of an original exploration of the vitality of modern black life, Brown saw in Van Vechten's work "cabarets supplanting cabins, and Harlemized 'blues,' instead of the spirituals and slave reels." Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven*, was very nearly a sacred cow, who received steady devotion from Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson. Brown readily rejected Van Vechten in the 1930s and in the subsequent decades provided additional epithets like "rascal" and "voyeur" and a judgment: "[Van Vechten] corrupted the Harlem Renaissance and was a terrible influence."²¹

Further to the left than Brown was Eugene Gordon (1891–1974), adjunct professor of philosophy, former student of Alain Locke, and mentor to Dorothy West. In 1935, when the Communist Party began developing its broad-based arts organizations like the League of American Writers, Gordon published the essay "Social and Political Problems of the Negro Writer." He described the situation of the black writer, an artist with a crucial racial theme, but without a natural audience. Gordon insisted that while the black writer was "chief propagandist"²² for his people, his work "interpret[s] and plead[s] for them to the white ruling class."²³ To Gordon, the pleading of the writers to the white elites in the idiom of African American masses was ironic. At the bottom of this dynamic of oppression, Gordon emphasized that the folk material that the critics had decided was important had a spark of revolution at its base. Without much shaping by elites, black America had evolved a reactionary culture in response to white supremacy. For Gordon and his Communist colleagues, "the Negro people of the Black Belt were nevertheless a suppressed nation; they were a slave nation."²⁴ The subsequent national cultural efforts – songs, folk tales, styles of interaction, ways of being – were inevitably tools to extricate blacks from their political condition. The slave songs were "fighting" spirituals and the elites would not cede power.

Richard Wright (1908–60) wrote the best-known critical prescription by a left-of-center black writer during the 1930s. The 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" developed and codified the general arguments of a Chicago cadre that included Frank Marshall Davis, Marian Minus, Edward Bland, Theodore Ward, and Margaret Walker. In "Blueprint," Wright made a formal demand for black writers to reject the ethic of racial celebration for which the

Harlem Renaissance group had been known. "Blueprint" brutally faulted the New Negro artists "curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human."²⁵ In step with Communists like Eugene Holmes, Wright emphasized flaws in black writing, and offered as ideological culprits the neglect of nationalism and the fawning obsequiousness toward white backers. These errors were compounded by the Renaissance writers' utter inability to erect a commanding literature from what already had been recognized as a superior tradition of folklore. Instead of celebrating the beauty of the race as a kind of priming necessary to enter the white mainstream, Wright suggested embracing black nationalism, and his most handy model was the then thriving National Negro Congress. "Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them," he scolded his audience. "They must accept the concept of nationalism in order to transcend it. They must *possess* and *understand* it."²⁶

The notion of black prideful cultural association was difficult for Negroes who could not enjoy the fullness of the society into which they had been born. Organizations which were all-black struck some of the younger writers as the legacy of second-best. J. Saunders Redding (1905–88) concealed his confusion and anger by embracing Wright's criteria in the 1939 book *To Make a Poet Black*, the third book devoted exclusively to black literature. Columbia University professor Vernon Loggins had written the first published modern study of black literature in 1931, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900*. Nick Aaron Ford's self-published master's thesis *The Negro Novelist* (1936) was the second. Redding was a black Ivy League graduate from a prestigious family, and a man for whom blackness was a travail. He recalled, "I raged with secret hatred and fear. I hated and feared the whites. I hated and feared and was ashamed of the Negroes."²⁷ The social psychologist and avid member of the 1940s literati Horace Cayton summed up this conundrum with his famous "Fear–Hate–Fear" syndrome, a condition in which blacks were victimized by overt white aggression as well as their own failure to respond aggressively to remedy injustice.²⁸ Redding fought himself emotionally to contain these feelings that moved from his anger at racial injustice to shame at black impotence and then wallowing in self-loathing.

To Make a Poet Black was a sweeping academic treatment of African American literature. Redding held black writers to a litmus test of national fidelity and racial celebration, similar to the ideology he had known as a child and, surprisingly considering his great difference from Richard Wright, similar to "Blueprint for Negro Writing." He offered an assertive condemnation of black writers like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley for failing to assert

their racial identities. “[N]ot once did she utter a straightforward word for the freedom of the Negro,” amounted to his judgment against Wheatley and in favor of George Moses Horton.²⁹ He expressed a view similar to Countee Cullen, whose work suffered from too “numerous disclaimers of an attitude narrowed by racial influence.”³⁰ His quarrel was not with the literary techniques, but with the thematic punch of the literature. But Redding’s rather single-minded estimate announced the presence of a new and proud formation: African American Literature. Redding divided the tradition into four parts – forerunners, abolitionists (he entitled the chapter “Let Freedom Ring”), adjusters, and New Negroes – fairly standard designations. But he showed a sensibility that could take in more than a national racial lineage in his conclusion. “Negro mothers, too, bore children in the ‘lost generation’,” he counseled his reader.³¹ If the 1920s expatriates had written chronicles of human loss and failure, then the resurrection of literary technique in the 1930s was an exciting model for black literature. In the hands of Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck, the 1930s had produced writing of considerable social significance. Following Redding’s logic, the black Lost Generation would soon launch its artistic champions.

Within a few months of Redding’s testimony to a robust ethnic tradition and a sense of shared American structural realities, Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis (a Virginia Union professor finishing a doctorate at Columbia), and Ulysses Lee (Brown’s student working on a doctorate at University of Chicago) published *The Negro Caravan* (1941), a mammoth modern anthology of black writing. All of a sudden, academic teachers of black literature had two semesters worth of material at their fingertips to structure courses on African American literature. Despite the fact that they had codified a body of work that seemed a distinctive unit of study, the anthologists specifically contested the implication that they had created a separate field. The editors wrote,

In spite of such unifying bonds as a common rejection of popular stereotypes and a common “racial” cause, writing by Negroes does not seem to the editors to fall into a unique cultural pattern. Negro writers have adopted the literary traditions that seemed useful for their purposes ... The bonds of literary tradition seem to be stronger than race.

The editors therefore do not believe that the expression “Negro literature” is an accurate one, and in spite of its convenient brevity, they have avoided using it. “Negro literature” has no application if it means structural peculiarity, or a Negro school of writing ... The editors consider Negro writers to be American writers, and literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature.³²

Brown and his academic colleagues, themselves vigorous opponents of racism, asked for a single standard of judgment, one that could be codified and met, and they demanded the recognition of black national citizenship – or fundamental belonging. This remained the academic view of the professional critic especially throughout the 1940s and 1950s as the NAACP legal strategy, more than partially created at Howard, wound through the American courts and destabilized the legal basis of American Jim Crow. What the Howard anthologists prescribed might be described as conjunctive with racial integration as a social philosophy.

The small journals and the committed Leftists would push out a bit further than this, and perhaps in most brilliant fashion they continued to keep alive the question about the exact nature of black culture and the precise position of formal criteria appropriate to engage black American life. The most significant organ that attempted to shape the discourse of black American writing in the 1940s was the short-lived journal *Negro Quarterly*, founded by Angelo Herndon in late 1941, and staffed for three of its four issues by managing editor Ralph Ellison (1913–94). The journal offered black intellectuals and writers an open venue in the days of their systematic exclusion from the American academic literary quarterlies and reviews. Ellison hoped to see “the new Negro consciousness,” of which Richard Wright was the central engine, create a “new society.”³³ Shortly after he took over the magazine’s editorial duties, an unsigned editorial appeared criticizing black intellectuals and politicians for failing to solve the “riddle of the zoot-suit,” or neglecting the political import of African American indigenous cultural forms of expression.³⁴ Ultimately, Ellison believed that the new consciousness of urbanized blacks might make a profound contribution to American life, particularly if these African Americans with access to new technologies did not abandon their folk culture. His work was at least partially designed to bring about such a transformation.

The most important critical work published in the *Quarterly* was by the black Chicago critic Edward Bland (1908–45), who had helped Wright shape “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Bland’s acerbic essay “Social Forces Shaping the Negro Novel” was one of the earliest examples of an unsentimental modern ideological criticism of black literature in theoretical terms. He took the gospel of sharp criticism to his audience immediately. “One of the outstanding features of the Negro novels that appeared during the twenties was their literary incompetence.”³⁵ Paying close attention to the “New Criticism,” unleashed in 1938 in Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, Bland focused on the technical poverty of the black novelist. He produced a critical view unafraid of smashing something. Bland was deeply

influenced by Marxism and he wanted black American life improved without having to be turned into an African exotic. And yet his work contained a flexibility and an independence unlike the disciplined professional radicals inside of the Communist Party. At the same time, he was more intellectually mature than what was coming out of the colleges or the professional integrationists.

Bland recognized American blacks as uniquely positioned; they were at the forefront of contact between the African and the globe. However, the epigonic black middle class, "reticent about the patterns and meaning of existence" and bereft of a consciousness of "the wider dimensions of life," was inadequate to produce a flourishing narrative tradition.³⁶ In a classic breach of faith with intellectual currents, Bland thought the overall middle class dependent upon the "social environment" for its consciousness, rather than the awe-inspiring power of Nature. The implications for the novel were great: "The creation of a sensibility whose contact with Man created only occasional and temporary feelings of inadequacy, this novel spurned the larger interests of the mind as seen through the major traditions of the West."³⁷ To Bland, the novelistic tradition of Jessie Fauset and W. E. B. Du Bois unhappily emphasized "conformity to civilized practices," and missed the nineteenth-century revolt against the convention of romantic melodrama by the romantic individual.³⁸ African American intellectual leaders who were fully a generation behind had left poverty in place of tradition for the black novelist.

Bland added one coda to this thesis of general malaise in March 1944, when Harriet Monroe's Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine published his essay "Racial Bias and Negro Poetry." He found black poets, and black writers more generally, holders of "pre-individualistic values," a belief system nearly opposed to the Western Enlightenment tradition of distinctive, individual humanistic examination. "Instead of seeing in terms of the individual, the Negro sees in terms of 'races,' masses of peoples separated from other masses according to color."³⁹ Bland decided that the "limitation" caused by this situation "detracts from whatever poetic skill may be otherwise present." He hoped that, in keeping with the American propaganda, the Second World War's successful conclusion would advance the humanistic elimination of white prejudice. And he also hoped that the "self-conscious 'race values'" that "impair and delimit the vision of the artist" would find their end.⁴⁰

One direct result of Bland's two essays was the inspiration of *Negro Quarterly's* managing editor Ralph Ellison. Ellison described his critical method in the middle 1940s as "one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all

external sociological factors operating within a given milieu."⁴¹ In 1945 he published in *Antioch Review* what was then arguably the strongest single reading of an African American novel by a black critic, the review essay of Wright's *Black Boy*, "Richard Wright's Blues," which was also one of the earliest works of criticism written by an African American published in an academic journal lodged at a historically white academic institution. In the essay Ellison set about the task of defining black America and its artistic tradition, and pointing out an indigenous critical method. More forcefully than J. Saunders Redding, Ellison explained black American identification patterns. "The American Negro is a Western type whose social condition creates a state which is almost the reverse of a cataleptic trance: instead of his consciousness being lucid to the reality around it while the body is rigid, here it is the body which is alert, reacting to pressures which the constricting forces of Jim Crow block off."⁴² For critics like Ellison and Redding, the "Negro" was an important digest of Africa, Europe, and the New World, the historical trauma of slavery, a half-millennium of Western sensibility, and the American consumer industry, chaffing against race discrimination.

His chief criterion for the literary work began with the notion that the work of art itself was the organized significance of human experience removed of any dross. In terms of his understanding of black culture, Ellison explained the critical value of African American folk contributions, and evaluated Wright from the standpoint of his adherence to the "blues," the lyrical syntax and thematic preoccupation of African American vernacular culture. Ellison had most fully assimilated Johnson's 1922 criterion for a "symbol from within." He seemed to demonstrate that black writers were at their best, or at least understood best, when they were connected to the threshing floor of ethnic folklore. In Ellison's hands, the gut-bucket licentious blues had also become a bit more than a mildly sinful popular under-spirit. He proposed that the blues was not only fun music but a ritual that contained elements of both philosophy and catharsis that clearly pointed in the direction of the postwar philosophy that would be called existentialism: "they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit ... they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self."⁴³ Wright's book was important not because it stressed the environment's shaping of the individual, but because, like Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson, Wright had given a lyrical and autobiographical catalog of despair.

Not many months later, Ellison was hard at work on another essay that he was unable to publish until 1953, and then under the title "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity." In that piece of criticism

he looked at Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, demonstrating the value of black critical perception to American literature. Here, Ellison found himself putting a blade into Sterling Brown's furrow, but emphasizing the collective unconscious of American classics over seventy-five years. Extending Brown's examination of the fraudulent representations of black life in fiction, Ellison suggested that eminent white American writers had been unable to look closely at the cultural psychological process that badly misshaped black characters, or simply erased the black American presence. Writers like Ernest Hemingway had been unable to grasp black characters because they had pushed the reality of American black experience into the "dangerous region," "down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and dream, down into the province of the psychiatrist and the artist, from whence spring the lunatic's fancy and the work of art."⁴⁴ Ellison thought that it was not just the individual artist who was limited, or that black life was stunted because of its maltreatment, but rather that the entire scope of American culture became underfed.

By excluding our largest minority from the democratic process, the United States weakened all national symbols and rendered sweeping public rituals which would dramatize the American dream impossible; it robbed the artist of a body of unassailable public beliefs upon which he could base his art; it deprived him of a personal faith in the ideals upon which society supposedly rested; and it provided him with no tragic mood indigenous to his society upon which he could erect a tragic art ... the quality of moral imagination – the fountainhead of great art – was atrophied within him.⁴⁵

Ellison concluded that white American writers simply exploited an available human resource, specifically one that aided their base psychological and emotional needs. Twain had produced Jim with heavy minstrel overtones and Hemingway had ignored lynching because the Negro had become "the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human 'natural' resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization."⁴⁶ Ellison's premise that the distance between black and white was "not so much spatial as psychological" and that "while they might dress and look alike, seldom on deeper levels do they think alike," was a final counter to the ideals of the black Victorians who had fixed success on reaching white appearance, from personal grooming to the kinds of literary tropes that a writer might choose.

The African American critic who seemed most committed to closing that psychological distance was the youthful James Baldwin (1924–87), whose career began with Jewish intellectual communities around *New Leader* and *Commentary* magazines in New York in 1947. In the first year as a published reviewer, Baldwin went back and forth between praise and rejection of social realism; and it was the latter position, of course, that made him famous among the New York intellectuals. He reviewed Irving Shulman's novel of Jewish gangs in Brooklyn, *The Amboy Dukes* (1947), and Baldwin thought the straightforward narrative had special meaning, because, like *Native Son*, it made a broad and "pessimistic" social indictment. "He does not say, but seems to know, that recreation halls and basketball games, the first resort of the civic minded, is a procedure about as effective as the application of Vaseline to a syphilitic lesion," Baldwin noted.⁴⁷ But later the same year, he looked more warily at Chester Himes's second novel *Lonely Crusade* (1947). Baldwin admitted that the book contained "an historical importance, not unlike that accorded *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or, more recently, *Native Son*." But he faulted Himes for leaving the protagonist no way out of his morass.

Unlike Bigger Thomas, gone to his death cell, inarticulate and destroyed by his need for identification and revenge, and with only the faintest intimation in that twilight of what destroyed him and of what his life might have been, Mr. Himes' protagonist, Lee Gordon, sees what has happened and what is happening and watches helplessly the progress of his own disease. *And there is no path out*. In a group so pressed down, terrified and at bay and carrying generations of constricted, subterranean hostility, no real group identification is possible. Nor is there a Negro tradition to cling to in the sense that Jews may be said to have a tradition; this was left in Africa long ago and no-one remembers it now. Lee Gordon is forced back on himself, not even bitterness can serve him as a weapon anymore.⁴⁸

In the spring of 1949 in Paris, Baldwin turned his attention to works of "historical importance" in the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." At the age of twenty-five, Baldwin would publish his most influential piece of criticism in a lifetime of writing. The essay, made especially beautiful because of a remarkable sense of self-confidence, repudiated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and countered, measure for measure, a recently published *New Yorker* essay of Edmund Wilson's that had praised the novel. Baldwin jumped in with both feet by calling Stowe's Civil War instigator "a very bad novel."

As a literary critic, Baldwin seemed to have no lineage. He seemed not to take his cues from the prim Victorians, the folk moderns, or the

Marxian-Freudian leftists. If anything, he was a black version of the Columbia professor Lionel Trilling. Much of "Everybody's Protest Novel" served as a primer for formalist criticism, the method that sought exclusively internal anchors to understand the importance and value of the literary artifact. Baldwin dissected the novelist's task away from straightforward political imperatives that relied upon invoking sentiment. He called sentimental fiction "the mark of dishonesty" and "the mask of cruelty." "The avowed aim of the American protest novel," he said, "is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed."⁴⁹ But Baldwin invoked another order of logic to regard what he claimed to have happened. "The protest novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary."⁵⁰

Instead of marshaling forces that left the structure of persecution intact, Baldwin looked to the distance and invoked a higher goal for anyone claiming the mantle of artist. The artist needed to reveal the unfathomable human depth at the base of the modern personality: the "resolutely indefinable, unpredictable ... disquieting complex[ity] ... this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness."⁵¹ These were terms used in a catalog by Lionel Trilling (1905–75) in his collected essays published that same year, *The Liberal Imagination* (1949), a collection that, among other things, eviscerated the political writers and the literary naturalists. Instead of the steady answers to society's problems found in a sentimental realist writer like Stowe or a naturalist like Theodore Dreiser, Trilling asked his reader to embrace the "complication and possibility, [of] surprise, intensification, variety, unfoldment, [and] worth" in the human experience.⁵² Baldwin finally decided that Richard Wright's *Native Son* had failed, exactly like Harriet Beecher Stowe, because the novel proved that it was Bigger Thomas's "categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."⁵³

The essay gained its significance over the years by caretaking the new liberal piety of the 1950s. Social protest written by African Americans like Chester Himes, Willard Motley, Ann Petry, Curtis Lucas, Carl Offord, William Attaway, and Richard Wright was condemned as "raging, near paranoiac postscript[s]" which "actually reinforce ... principles which activate the oppression they decry."⁵⁴ Of course, it is also contextually important to understand that the essay perhaps could only have been written from France, where Baldwin himself had fled, in an effort to reconcile what was happening to him on account of American racism. It is also possible that he picked an especially supine bogey with the "protest novel," a straw man in fact that the serious artist had already put away.

For the critics who remained stateside, like Morgan State College English department chairman Nick Aaron Ford (1904–82), propaganda-style protest literature was a fine endeavor. Ford had, like Sterling Brown and J. Saunders Redding, been a teacher of African American literature at the college level since the 1930s. He had resisted a racist climate and a black professoriate heavy with snobbish Victorians who disdained – or feared – an encounter with literature written by Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Ford liked to dismiss them as “dead fossils of a lost generation.”⁵⁵ In 1941 Ford told a group of reluctant black educators that *Native Son* had “done more to plead the cause of the underprivileged Negro than anything since Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” Ford believed all that was necessary to “revolutionize America’s treatment of the Negro within a decade” was “two or three more novels with the power and significance of *Native Son*.”⁵⁶ What worried him was that *Native Son* cut two ways. It could be both “favorable to the race” and “constructing a Frankenstein which perverts the very devices he uses to win his audience into cudgels of destruction.”⁵⁷ However, by the 1950s, Ford was still awaiting *Native Son*’s worthy companions.

Hampton Institute professor Hugh Gloster (1911–2002) moved to the front rank of the academicians studying black literature with his *Negro Voices in American Fiction* in 1948. Gloster’s book, which treated black writers and black characters in American fiction from the Civil War through the Depression, built on the work already done by Nick Aaron Ford, Sterling Brown, and J. Saunders Redding. With the book, he became the second black academic to have his criticism of African American literature published by a university press in the United States. Like Ford, Gloster held up Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as the benchmark of African American creative fiction, and he matched his sympathies to the editors of *The Negro Caravan* when responding to the national question of black literature. Black literature was “really part and parcel of the main body of American authorship” which showed “inextricable patterns in the warp and woof of the American literary fabric,” he argued in his introduction.⁵⁸ A chief criterion for Gloster was the unadulterated opposition to racial persecution. For him, the works of William Faulkner, T. S. Stribling, and Erskine Caldwell had turned the tide of Southern romanticism in the treatment of blacks. Gloster praised Caldwell’s lynching novel *Trouble in July*, which was widely condemned as horrible art, calling it “an outstanding attack upon racial persecution.”⁵⁹

Gloster believed in works by white writers that struggled to expose black persecution, but he took exception to white tastemakers and philanthropists.

He promoted the view, as did others of his contemporaries like Sterling Brown, J. Saunders Redding, and Ralph Ellison, that whites had torpedoed the Harlem writers of the 1920s. This was an unequivocal mission for Gloster's generation, the correction of the exotic and white influence in the Harlem Renaissance. Gloster said that Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* "affected the work of Negro fictionists more than any other book in the history of American literature."⁶⁰ The influence was malevolent, since instead of political courage, Van Vechten had explored "jazz, sex, atavism and primitivism." The Renaissance was "primarily a fad" and Van Vechten and his friends' "fatal mistake" was to "make a fetish of sex and the cabaret rather than to give a faithful, realistic presentation and interpretation of Harlem life."⁶¹ Though Van Vechten had to take his lumps, it was also the literature of the black writers from the 1920s being called into question.

By the second half of the 1940s, the direction of the condemnations shifted. For several of the critics in the 1930s and early 1940s, the problem with earlier generations of black writers had been their unwillingness to connect closely enough with the black peasantry and to channel their political crisis, which became, in Marxist lingo, the lack of "social conscience." But after the Second World War more blacks were dissatisfied with what they decided were examples of unpolished art and shallow intellect. "Almost every writer or would be writer who so much as lived in or around New York in the middle or late Twenties" had received attention, one critic claimed. "[S]ome of those who got attention simply were not worth it."⁶² The new culprits would include famous black writers. Young critic Blyden Jackson (1910–2000) exposed the flaws in Countee Cullen's work and then upbraided the scholars for letting it happen. Jackson could not identify the Negro Alfred Kazin, Van Wyck Brooks, or Vernon Parrington. "The literature does not, and should not come first, with the critics following in its wake," Jackson said. "The critics, with their revelations, their encouragement, their warnings, their guidance, should come first, and the literature should develop behind them into a tradition which not only the artists, but the critics, have had a hand in defining and creating."⁶³

Southern University's English department chairman John S. Lash took the question a step further in the October 1947 article "What Is Negro Literature?" Lash judged that Negro contributions to American literature were slight and that as a genre "Negro literature" did not exist. He stood on the principle that, "[l]iterature must remain the study of belles-lettres and must not be allowed to be prostituted to the cause of social justice for any group."⁶⁴ The thunder continued. "The body of literature by Negro writers

does not yield an archetype or a stereotype which embodies characteristic excellencies and defects of separate writers.”⁶⁵ The novelist Waters Turpin (*These Low Grounds*, 1937 and *O Canaan!*, 1939), teaching English at Lincoln College for Men in Pennsylvania, seconded the view that the humorless black novelists, especially the tawdry Chester Himes, had pursued too narrow a focus. Black prose writers were “too preoccupied with the racial theme to give full rein to his powers.”⁶⁶

It was not until the latter 1950s that the critic, salon leader, and Howard professor Margaret Just Butcher (1913) recuperated the writers of the 1920s in the book *The Negro in American Culture* (1956). Butcher had the advantage of the 1954 *Brown* Supreme Court decision to steady her optimistic celebration of the 1920s, which was inconceivable just a few years earlier.

The young Negro writers of the twenties dealt objectively with their materials, employing a certain detachment of artistic vision, handling racial themes as neither typical nor representative. By breaking with the past literary tradition, Negro writers were developing greater sophistication of style, wider and more universal appeal ... The increasing tendency was to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as idiom or style would add to the general resources of art. Much of the flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose (and verse and music), and color and tone of imagery that today give distinction to Negro art was discernible in the work of Negro artists in the twenties.⁶⁷

In spite of the Cold War and the drive toward conformity in the USA, black critics were interested in identifying and reclaiming a unique culture, rooted in communicative practices.

The announcement that the Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000) had won the Pulitzer Prize for her 1949 collection *Annie Allen* brought an invigorated assessment of African American writing, its possibilities, and the critic’s responsibilities. Atlanta University’s journal *Phylon* held a colloquy in its pages at the end of 1950, called “The Negro in Literature: The Current Scene.” Of the group of twenty-one writers and academic critics, the black critical establishment was in agreement on the basic assessment: black creative writing had developed promisingly, but it had not reached full maturity and it painfully lacked a critical tradition. The old man of the group, Alain Locke, declared the paradigm shift away from the 1940s to the 1950s by following James Baldwin and changing his views on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, which he now considered an epic in lost virtue. “I think all would agree that the first two chapters of *Native Son* had such quality, not to mention how and why the book as a whole lost these virtues as it became more involved in propagandist

formula."⁶⁸ Propaganda by or for the race was dead, and Wright would serve as the scapegoat for the egregious sins of the propagandist. The "propagandist formulae" was a code word for Communism and Marxism, and the left-wing critics did not attend the conference.

The danger of propaganda also seemed apparent to the youngest contributor, William Gardner Smith (1927–74), whose second novel *Anger at Innocence* (1950) had also appeared that year. Inspired in his opposition to propaganda, and claiming the philosophy of relativity, slashing away at the notion of absolutes in morality and art, Smith followed along the line of ripping a soggy tradition. "I have not read one Negro novel which has truthfully represented the many-sided character of the Negro in American society today."⁶⁹ His verdict brought swift accord. Gwendolyn Brooks reprimanded black poets for throwing out raw ingredients to their audiences instead of finished material. Blyden Jackson called African American writing "too often execrable," then noted that when it was not, such as with Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," the lazy professional critics ignored the work.⁷⁰

William Gardner Smith had escaped the label of propagandist in the manner of the commercially successful black writers Willard Motley and Frank Yerby because his Philadelphia novel had no black characters. By the logic of 1950, this was a fine decision, and found an opposing voice only in J. Saunders Redding. Interviewed by *Phylon* editors Carl Holman, N. P. Tillman, and Thomas Jarrett, Langston Hughes applauded blacks for writing about "non-Negro" themes. The position was seconded by Hugh Gloster, who now winced at black writers' "preponderating use of racial subject matter," a strategy that he argued had grievously slowed their artistic development.⁷¹ Consumed by the race question, the writers had only a shallow perception of the human condition, rendered their work humorlessly, failed to contribute to the world of ideas, and bricked themselves into a publishing ghetto. Thomas Jarrett hoped to see the very notion of any exclusivity eased from view. He noted with approval that "the expression 'Negro literature' finds less acceptance among intellectual circles than ever before."⁷²

Ulysses Lee (1913–69) seconded Blyden Jackson and pummeled the critical tradition, which he argued had not advanced since the 1930s works of Benjamin Brawley, Alain Locke, and Sterling Brown – his Howard professors. Lee hoped to claim the modern critical problem-solving methods of the New Criticism as opposed to the catalogs of achievement and loose biographical and bibliographical data that had characterized "criticism" of the turn of the century. But he did not see provided in the more recent works of Nick Aaron Ford, J. Saunders Redding, or Hugh Gloster much more than plot summary

and a sentence or two of critical comment. But then the social condition of American racism yet intervened against "receiving and transmitting ideas and standards," the basic activity of a critical tradition. Since black college professors were "too busy as teachers and missionaries," Lee found mainly the aesthetic criterion of "evidence of advance and achievement, to be shared and gloried in."⁷³ Alain Locke commented on the intellectual development and saw more of a total problem. "The Negro intellectual is still largely in psychological bondage," he said. Black critics floundered because they were afraid of

breaking the taboos of Puritanism, Philistinism and falsely conceived conventions of "race respectability." Consciously and subconsciously, these conventions work great artistic harm, especially the fear of being accused of group disloyalty and "misrepresentation" in portraying the full gamut of Negro type.⁷⁴

Locke, who had admired James Baldwin's work as soon as it had appeared in *Commentary* in 1948, pointed out the reason why Baldwin's essay won so much glory.

Margaret Walker (1915–98), a professor at Jackson State Teachers' College in Mississippi, at least recalled the powerful commitments that had launched her into the world of poetic stardom in the late 1930s. She saw the gigantic turn toward the complex modernist literary expression of Gwendolyn Brooks as an example of a "religious revival," the defense mechanism of Western society struggling with the threat of atomic annihilation. Noting the gallop of high modernist poets T. S. Eliot and Robert Lowell to orthodox Catholicism, Walker recognized a combination of "fear and hysteria" and the "desire for inner self-analysis, reflection and introspective knowledge that may lead, thereby, to a spiritual panacea." "Whether to Catholicism, Existentialism, or Communism, modern man is turning to some definite belief around which to integrate his life and give it true wholeness and meaning."⁷⁵ American literature obviously could anticipate new writerly directions and it would shift a bit to accommodate them. Walker labeled the emphasis on difficulty, ambiguity, and formal artistic quality a resurgence of neoclassicism. She also prophesied a danger, a tendency "toward intellectual themes of psychological and philosophical implication which border on obscurantism."⁷⁶

The excluded left-wing critics had always served as a brake on the obscure, and they indeed had a component to add to the debate swirling around literary method, folk heritage, and national belonging. In 1947 playwright Theodore Ward (1902–83) wrote perhaps the least sympathetic assessment of the

important black novelists after the Second World War. In the Communist Party's highest cultural journal *Mainstream*, Ward rebuked his own crowd, especially his ex-friend Richard Wright, with the essay "Five Negro Novelists." The work, a dismissal of every well-known black prose expert, showed that, whatever good intentions lay behind his commitment, Ward's ability at discernment was completely given over to an impractical and wooden ideology. In his analysis, the artist had no right to any freedom of vision whatsoever, especially not one that viewed the race issue as beyond a pat solution. Novelists needed to depict the "well known" characteristics of the "Negro people": "the greatest courage and stability and capacity for progress despite the most limited opportunity," Ward wrote.⁷⁷ He demanded that black writers produce heroes. The young Communist critic Lloyd Brown, just past thirty years old, relied upon the same network of ideas when he reviewed Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade*. "I cannot recall ever having read a worse book on the Negro theme."⁷⁸ Protest there was need for, but only the sort that cured society's ills.

The most important piece of Communist criticism that inspired younger black writers like Harold Cruse was by the highest-ranking black cultural critic in the Party, Doxey Wilkerson.⁷⁹ In 1949 Wilkerson (1905–93) published "Negro Culture: Heritage and Weapon" and repudiated the notion that black writers were only Americans.

The Negro arts defy adequate and fundamental understanding unless they are viewed as expression of a *distinct people* within the general population of the United States, reflecting their *special* relations to the society as a whole, giving expression to their *special* memories, traditions and aspirations. Only in relation to the development of Negro Americans as an increasingly organized, self-conscious political entity within the American scene does the concept of Negro culture take on full meaning.⁸⁰

Drawing upon the example of the spirituals, the universally acknowledged backbone of black America's cultural production, Wilkerson asserted pride in what was politely called miscegenation and impolitely called mongrelization. "But neither Africans nor white Americans could possibly have created the spirituals. They grow out of and give expression to the struggles and sentiments and aspirations of Negroes under specific conditions of slavery in the United States. They are the cultural manifestations of the consciousness of a developing people, the Negro people. They are a great body of Negro culture."⁸¹ Strident in his politics perhaps, Wilkerson admonished blacks away from the grail of assimilation to white norms and toward "the full and honest interpretation of his own consciousness – through the expression of those

memories, ideas, sentiments and aspirations which constitute the special psychological make-up of the Negro people.”⁸²

A few months into 1951, Lloyd Brown (1913–2003) decided that there was little to be gained from two signals that black critics had been sending to black writers. In the essays in March and April *Masses and Mainstream*, “Which Way the Negro Writer,” he rejected the 1940 ethos of Sterling Brown and Arthur P. Davis, that “Negro American literature” did not exist, per se, as a source of distinction, and second, that in the *Phylon* half-century symposium, the notion that black novelists constructing stories without black protagonists was a solid index of racial advance. Following up Wilkerson, Brown opposed the equation of universality with a “raceless” or “non-Negro theme” work, or one that avoided elements of black life and history. “What tragic folly for him to turn away from the virtually untapped richness of this subject toward some nebulous and non-existent ‘universality’!”⁸³ Brown continued, “the trouble with Negro literature ... is that it *has not been Negro enough*.”⁸⁴

Hampton Institute professor Blyden Jackson, working for the *Phylon* editorial board, decided to debate Brown over the issue of art and politics. Jackson proposed the issues fundamentally tangling the problem of writing as “an artist” with “perspective,” as opposed to “a person who demands to be read primarily because his cause is just.”⁸⁵ The willingness of black critics to squabble collegially with the committed Communist, moving underground on account of the enforcement of the Smith Act, showed that the black Southern critic had not succumbed to a McCarthyism of the mind. “And I do not think ... that his being a representative of the far left plays any appreciable role in my aversion to his flatfooted stand,” Jackson said, before making his aesthetic standard known. “It seems to me best to judge people, and artists, on a synthesis which gives due weight both to the quality of conception and the quality of performance.”⁸⁶ The parley emphasized that racial identity during the age of segregation was a profound bridge between diverging political programs. Brown, the committed Marxist-Leninist, had advocated a profoundly black-based cultural expression. Jackson, an Aristotelian subscribing to the effect produced by the climbing meaning of enjoined literary form and content, which might render an “elixir” of “eternal life,” used as his example of “vilely” written work NAACP secretary Walter White’s *Flight* (1926).

But the looming demise of the segregation barriers precipitated a new kind of black frustration, different from the leftists and different from the black teachers tethered to black students in the South. A young critic could still gain notoriety by writing off the idea of tradition and mocking liberal

efforts to end racism. In the spring of 1951, *Kenyon Review* published its first piece by a young black tyro and Kenyon College undergraduate named Richard Gibson. Gibson, who knew Robert Penn Warren and Lionel Trilling, and was admired by John Crowe Ransom, seemed to belong to the New Critical camp. The article "A No to Nothing" caused a stir, waspishly striking out against the publishing industry, American liberals, and every black writer who had ever picked up a pen. When Gibson shouted that "there is not yet a single work of literature by an American Negro which, when judged without bias, stands out as a masterpiece," this was old news to black writers, but the first time that the white academy, and the New Critics no less, had taken notice.⁸⁷ Gibson seemed to relish his individuality and even deliberately to alienate himself from others. The chief source of his fury was the publishing industry. If the more conservative blacks like *Ebony* editor Era Bell Thompson claimed that it was an excellent time to be a black writer, Gibson was enraged at the publishers' expectations. "The young Negro writer discovers to his bitter amazement that he is nearly trapped by the Problem."⁸⁸ Gibson believed that neither the "Professional Liberal" nor the "many paranoiac Negroes obsessed with the injustices done them" would allow "a Negro the right to be human, to become a man and walk with his own strength his own way."⁸⁹ In his view, anthologies of black writers and poets, such as were published by Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Nick Aaron Ford, preserved the inept work of black artists, and the source of their deficiency was a "minstrel psychology."⁹⁰

The shrill accusatory criticism prepared black writers for the attention they would invite in the 1950s when several would attain bona fide stardom, but none for their critical work. Black critics were not sure precisely what they had, though some of them suspected that they were on the verge of losing it. J. Saunders Redding, who published a weekly review in the *Afro-American* newspaper, delivered caustic commentary about all of the 1950s modernist innovators. In one review he called Gwendolyn Brooks's *Annie Allen* obtuse, appreciable only to a "coterie,"⁹¹ and in another he described *Maud Martha* as "nearly perfect," but too short.⁹² Redding determined that Ralph Ellison's National Book Award-earning *Invisible Man* had "superb writing ... as wonder producing as anything in modern fiction," but was ridden by a "fantastic lack of causality, [the] gross exaggeration of the pointless and inconsequential."⁹³ He pronounced Ann Petry's *The Narrows* "a good novel, but Ann Petry will write better."⁹⁴ Melvin B. Tolson's "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia" insulted Redding on account of its footnotes and condescending introduction by Southern agrarian critic Allen Tate.⁹⁵ Richard Wright's *The Outsider* flatly

“disappoint[ed]” him.⁹⁶ Redding enjoyed the complexity himself, but flagged the moderns for cutting themselves away from their black audience.

His concern in regard to the black writers’ shifting away from black audiences and African American cultural strengths collected in his estimate of one writer especially. For James Baldwin, the man who would become best recognized as the herald of modernist complexity and ambiguity, Redding had more than impatience; he had contempt. After praising *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Redding condemned Baldwin’s better-known collection *Notes of a Native Son*, in particular the popular essay “Stranger in the Village.” In the article Baldwin had lamented the absence of a black cultural heritage of significance. Even the boorish among the Swiss peasants “move with an authority I will never have,” Baldwin said.⁹⁷ “Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory – but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.”⁹⁸ The avowed critic of literary protest had also adopted the mantra of the New York Intellectuals that basically rejected the existence of black culture. While he left alone Baldwin’s famous dismissals of the social realist literary tradition, Redding vehemently disagreed with Baldwin’s estimate that black Americans were inadequate Westerners. “Can Baldwin believe that the American Negro is unqualified ‘not merely disqualified!’ in the very nature of him and in experience to find his identity in America?,” Redding asked.⁹⁹ One generation had presumed that the black critics had followed along as the second-rate disciples of the artistic movements; the next generation seemed to find it necessary to attenuate their relationship to their folk heritage.

Baldwin did not dwell on the white world’s reluctance to admit blacks into the mainstream or on the particular value that black Americans possessed by themselves, one of the jobs of Redding’s generation. His critical work from the 1940s and 1950s assumed the basic nature of an ethnically and racially diverse society. Racial integration made Redding uneasy, in spite of the fact that it was a pursuit that had defined his adult life and the meaning of his courage. Brown University, which he had attended in the 1920s, was officially desegregated. But it had been impossible for Redding, even with his Phi Beta Kappa key, to participate fully in student life. He claimed never to have particularly esteemed the position that Baldwin had assumed. Redding had accepted the standpoint of integration as an act of desperation: “It was rather like the action of one who kicks and splashes frantically to save himself from drowning and suddenly finds that he has reached a shelf on which he can stand in the river bed. His objective was not the shelf, but just to be saved. I kicked and splashed in all directions, and suddenly there I was.”¹⁰⁰

Redding's peer Arthur P. Davis (1904–96) noted the shift in attitudes that forded one chasm but which seemed to tear down a vital bulwark simultaneously. "I think we can safely say that the heaven of integration is very much at work," Davis announced in 1956.¹⁰¹ But the victory of nearly one hundred years of postbellum struggle carried a sharp and unintended consequence for black creative artists. "It has forced the Negro creative artist to play down his most cherished tradition."¹⁰² Davis of course noted the disfavor toward the tradition of narrative literature that had been written by Richard Wright, Chester Himes and Ann Petry. But clearly the "protest" novels that Baldwin decried and the concept of an independent black culture had become twined in the debate. African American writers had picked up the techniques of naturalists, Marxists, and environmental determinists during the Depression to make a strong argument for assimilation. By the end of the 1950s, the "protest" writers were ineluctably alloyed to the believers that black people had a culture worth losing, a genuine and admirable source of their difference, a cup that necessarily carried both shame and transcendence.

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African American literatures and New World cultures

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Although hardly unknown among scholars of African American literature, George Schuyler's 1926 article "The Negro-Art Hokum" is more famous for having prompted Langston Hughes to write his landmark essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," than for having persuaded Schuyler's readers that black and white literatures were largely indistinguishable from one another. Schuyler insisted that "the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans ... is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans: that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence."¹ More a provocation than a sociology of literary production in the United States and the New World, Schuyler's argument nonetheless helpfully frames two questions that, implicitly and explicitly, have always attended discussions of African American literature: are there qualities and characteristics that distinguish literary production and practice by African-descended peoples in the Americas from the literatures produced by individuals who emigrated from Europe or Asia? And how has the presence of African-descended peoples shaped the institution of literature in the various nations of the Americas? Schuyler argued that so-called racial characteristics were really the products of subgroups. Readily conceding that "from dark-skinned sources have come those slave songs based on Protestant hymns and Biblical texts known as the spirituals, work songs and secular songs of sorrow and tough luck known as the blues, that outgrowth of rag-time known as jazz (in the development of which whites have assisted), and the Charleston, an eccentric dance invented by the gamins around the public market-place in Charleston, S.C.," Schuyler nonetheless insisted these expressive forms were simply the "contributions of a caste in a certain section of the country" and therefore "no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race."²

Although Hughes's more famous response stressed the distinctiveness of black literature, it did so in a way ironically confirming Schuyler's observation that black literature differed little from white literature and that so-called black culture was the culture of only a certain fraction of the nation's black population. According to Hughes, the black middle class (from which most black writers hailed) tended to mirror its white counterpart: The black "father goes to work every morning. He is the chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines."³ Consequently, writers from this class could hardly be expected to produce distinctive literature. If what one wanted was cultural distinctiveness one would have to seek it among the "low-down folks, the so-called common element."⁴ But unlike Schuyler, who saw this class as non-representative, Hughes viewed the expressive culture of the low-down folks as containing what black literature at its best ought to be. The poems produced by Hughes during the 1920s, which established his literary reputation, self-consciously incorporated the language and cadence of blues singers.

Behind Hughes's "ought" stood an assumption that an important weapon in the subordination of black people in the Americas had been the assault on and the suppression of any African cultural practices and beliefs that enslaved blacks had carried with them to the New World. This emphasis on cultural suppression and domination reflected a shift in the way that black writers in the early twentieth century began to describe the causes, consequences, and remedies for black subordination. On this account, racial domination had done more than merely deny blacks access to what Du Bois, at the turn of the century, termed "the kingdom of culture," within which they could prove themselves capable of understanding and appreciating the best works by European artists and writers.⁵ Domination had also rested on and proliferated claims that Africans had produced no civilization worthy of the name and that cultural practices developed in captivity were little more than inept attempts by an inferior people to ape their white betters. Such charges constituted one of the ways that whites had sought to extend into the realm of black psychology and self-image the economic and social domination they had achieved through the exercise of violence and political power. The remedy here, according to Du Bois, in an argument that was to prove influential for the production of black literature for the next century, was to see that the "destiny" of black culture did not entail "a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals" – a project that depended on postulating that it was the black folk,

the people on the bottom rungs of the social ladder, who had best resisted the psychic assaults of racism, and in some instances provided the most secure conduits for conveying African culture to the New World.⁶ In his famous chapter on black spirituals in *The Souls of Black Folks* Du Bois affirmed that it was the "black folk of primitive type, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt" whose "singing stirred men with a mighty power."⁷ According to Du Bois, these songs, which had traveled with the enslaved from Africa but had been elaborated in the New World, not only conveyed "the articulate message of the slave to the world,"⁸ but also constituted the only original music the American society had produced. Setting the stage for the disagreement between Hughes and Schuyler, Du Bois wondered whether it would be possible for African Americans to retain some degree of black distinctiveness and to shape the broader contours of American high culture.

In what follows I will attempt not so much to demonstrate how black literature in the United States has or has not been affected by what are often deemed black cultures in the New World (or to locate African American literature within a distinctive black culture) as to outline the literary, cultural, and scholarly projects that have arisen out of the debate about black cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. I will first rehearse briefly the discussion about African American cultural distinctiveness among anthropologists and then show why, despite the difficulties of settling the argument concerning ongoing African influence over New World black cultures, various writers and critics have found it appealing to attribute to African American literature a distinctiveness deriving from African roots. Next I examine attempts to ground black literary difference in a claim about black linguistic difference. As I will point out, linguistic scholarship alerts us to a variety of problems that attend both the effort to attribute what sounds different about black language to derivations from specific African languages and also the attempt to distinguish black speech from white speech. Despite these difficulties, African American literature and the commentary on that literature have attempted in a number of ways to center African American literary practice on a claim of black linguistic difference. I then conclude by describing the emergence among major black writers in the late twentieth century of a project of cultural recuperation and cultural memory.

Although few would contest the claim of the narrator of James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* that African American literature has achieved influence on a world scale, there has been considerable disagreement over whether or not a sufficient number of

enslaved Africans in the New World had passed along from generation to generation enough in the way of ancestral practices and beliefs to warrant the claim that blacks differed culturally from whites in terms of day-to-day practices and guiding attitudes. Melville Herskovits's 1941 *The Myth of the Negro Past* made the case that understanding black social behavior in the present required recognizing the "survivals," "retentions," and "syncretisms" from the African past that had persisted into the present. Disputing the claim that the disparate origins of enslaved Africans and the brutal conditions of the New World plantations had made such transmissions impossible, Herskovits argued that African Americans in the New World had indeed melded old and new practices in a distinctive manner. Du Bois, who had long argued for the necessity of developing black cultural "gifts," praised Herskovits's book as "epoch-making."⁹

Dissenting from Herskovits, E. Franklin Frazier contended that urbanization, industrialization, and mobility had contributed to the virtual disappearance among New World blacks of cultural practices that could be traced to Africa. Studying several families associated with *candomblé* in the Brazilian state of Bahia, where African holdovers might be expected to be at their strongest, Frazier concluded, "Because of the racial mixture which has taken place on a large scale, African patterns of family life have tended to disappear." In Frazier's estimation, the family patterns that Herskovits attributed to the retention of cultural patterns were, in reality, "natural organizations" that commonly existed among poorer peoples regardless of their cultural origins.¹⁰

Although Frazier pointed out various flaws in Herskovits's analyses, some of which have been corroborated by subsequent scholarship, the main current of the discussion of black cultural distinctiveness in the New World has flowed along the channel delved by Herskovits. Several factors (too many to address in detail here) contributed to this tendency. Decolonization movements in Africa and across the Global South helped focus attention on the notion of national autonomy and the idea that individuals had the right to exercise those practices they deemed as defining cultural or group membership. Accordingly, Article 22 of the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights mandated recognition of an individual's "social and cultural rights." Likewise the consolidation of a liberal consensus against both fascism and Stalinism, which together were seen as constituting the threat of totalitarianism, led to a correlative valuation of what were described as individual and local differences necessary for the preservation of freedom.

But perhaps most important in bending the course of social science scholarship in the direction of Herskovits was the need to counter the arguments

about black culture, or the lack thereof, put forward by Stanley Elkins in his study, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional Life* (1958). Influenced by psychological investigations of Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps, Elkins contended that the experiences of black Americans under slavery approximated aspects of these camps, thus making it virtually impossible for North American blacks to have perpetuated cultural practices from Africa or to have established their own semi-autonomous culture. Elkins insisted on the reality of the “Sambo” personality – a childlike figure who identified more with the slavemaster than with his social peers and predecessors.

Published during the modern Civil Rights era, and not long before the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, Elkins’s book helped trigger a variety of anthropological and sociological studies contesting Elkins’s conclusions. Some followed Herskovits in emphasizing cultural retentions and syncretisms, and some, like Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, first published as *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past* in 1976, argued that the processes begun in captivity had laid the basis for what subsequently became African American culture. Noting that no “group, no matter how well-equipped or how free to choose, can transfer its way of life and the accompanying beliefs in values intact from one locale to another” and disagreeing with the claim “that those Africans who were enslaved and transported to the New World can be said to have shared a *culture*, in the sense that European colonists in a particular colony can be said to have done so,” Mintz and Price nonetheless went on to argue that the interactions among Africans that began with the Middle Passage were likely shaped by “common basic assumptions about social relations or the workings of the universe.”¹¹

Hoping to shift attention from African retentions as the basis for claiming African American cultural distinctiveness to New World processes oriented by common assumptions deriving from Africa, Mintz and Price reignited rather than settled the debate over whether African American culture ought to be considered more African than American. This discussion produced a host of works, including Lawrence W. Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979), and Sterling Stuckey’s *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* (1994). Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983) sought to flesh out how daily life, religious practices, and cultural expression, even into the twentieth century, reflected the ongoing influence of practices originating on the African

continent. Irrespective of the ways in which these various authors approached the question of African heritage, they tended to presume some notion of common black group identity as a baseline for analysis. The opening passage of Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* makes explicit the unspoken sensibility shaping much of this work. Stuckey writes,

The final gift of African "tribalism" in the nineteenth century was its life as a lingering memory in the minds of American slaves. That memory enabled them to go back to the sense of community in the traditional African setting and to include all Africans in their common experience of oppression in North America.¹²

In taking on the claim that African Americans had little or no psychic and cultural armor to deflect the blows of enslavement and second-class citizenship, social science scholars were in some sense following a path that had been delved by literary writers who had in various ways represented the laboring denizens of black towns and urban neighborhoods as living lives governed by norms that sometimes differed from those of the dominant white society, and as possessing a vitality absent in the lives of their supposed social superiors. For example, a figure like Jake Brown, the protagonist of Claude McKay's Harlem Renaissance novel, *Home to Harlem*, embodies a way of being in the world that stands at odds with the enervated protagonists of the contemporaneous fictions of Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Even Richard Wright, who described racial discrimination as a "corroding and devastating attack upon the personalities of men," and whose protagonist Bigger Thomas, from his landmark 1940 novel *Native Son*, might appear at first glance to be a poster boy for the idea that blacks lead an impoverished cultural life, reserved most of his critical ire for a dominant culture that had produced white citizens who lacked "the insight or the emotional equipment to understand themselves or others."¹³ In a similar vein, Ralph Ellison observed that if "lynching and Hollywood, fadism and radio advertising are products of the 'higher' culture, [then] the Negro might ask, 'Why, if my culture is pathological, must I exchange it for these?'"¹⁴

Yet, however forcefully they refuted allegations of black cultural inferiority or pathology, and whether or not they discerned African influences in black behavior and attitudes, African American authors still faced the problem of demonstrating how the relatively specialized endeavor of producing imaginative literature for publication and circulation related to broader cultural practices. At first glance this would not appear to be a problem at all, given

that writers work through and on language, and that language is itself a necessary – if not the primary – medium in the production, transmission, and modification of what we understand as culture. Precepts and instructions for behavior as well as accounts of the past and the way the world is constituted are communicated through language, which is also a medium of interaction enabling members of a group to constitute themselves as a group or a people while differentiating themselves from other groups. In other words, to produce literature would be to produce culture and cultural difference.

Accordingly, it might stand to reason that if, by virtue of the influence of their native tongues, Africans in the New World spoke European languages differently from their European captors, then the literature written by African-descended writers would also differ from dominant literatures. Yet the story of African languages in the New World is anything but straightforward. To be sure, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators on the African presence in the Americas often remarked that the European languages spoken by both enslaved Africans and the whites living in proximity to them differed from the languages spoken in European metropolises and in New World areas with few black inhabitants – differences that seemed to indicate the influence of specific African languages on European ones. Even here, however, it is not simply the case that patterns of speech among American blacks preserved the integrity of African languages. Coming from different speech communities on the African continent and faced with the necessity of communicating not only with their fellow captives but with Europeans, who themselves often spoke non-standard versions of their own languages, enslaved Africans along with their European captors developed pidgins and creoles that were different from their languages of origin.

As Salikoko Mufwene observes, despite what were certainly the captives' longings for their homelands, the deciding linguistic factors may have been "whether they could continue to speak African languages and whether they could have chosen not to speak the European colonial language." Not only did their survival depend "very much on mastery of the European languages," but refusal often brought on "the most demanding and the harshest tasks." By contrast, mastery sometimes gave slaves "a chance of being ranked higher and being given some of the more interesting jobs and probably having some privileges." Indeed, "learning to speak the European colonial language was an investment." To be sure, as Mufwene notes, African languages sometimes "became kinds of secret languages. But secret languages can only survive if you have other people who know those secret codes. The circumstances on

the plantations didn't really offer those kinds of communities where you would find so many people to speak Ibo or Yoruba or KiKongo."¹⁵

So while African languages influenced the way that Africans in the New World spoke European languages, the enforced social interactions that began with captivity appear to have been just as influential as African linguistic structures. These interactions also affected the language spoken by some whites, with the result that distinguishing between black and white forms of spoken English for the purpose of cultural differentiation becomes anything but straightforward. Although the primary goal of Zora Neale Hurston's essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) is to account for black cultural distinctiveness, she also notes the ways in which black and white spoken language have converged. Hurston writes that while it is true "that the Negro has introduced no African words to the language ... it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has had his revision accepted by the ruling class. No one listening to a Southern white man talk could deny this."¹⁶ Indeed Shelley Fisher Fishkin has argued persuasively that the most famous white vernacular voice in American literature – the voice of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* – was modeled on that of a young black boy, whom Twain portrayed in a short piece called "Sociable Jimmy."¹⁷

Nonetheless, a dominant storyline chronicling race and literature in the New World has emphasized linguistic difference. This is in part a result of the emergence of blackface minstrelsy in the United States in the late 1820s as the nation's most popular theatrical form, which contributed significantly to the belief that black Southern speech was easily distinguishable from white Southern speech. The minstrel stage – upon which white actors with faces blackened with burnt cork presented themselves as performing authentic representations of black speech, humor, and dance – traded in malapropisms, circumlocutions, and neologisms to produce comic and pathetic effects. The popularity of minstrelsy in the United States and Europe meant that for sizeable numbers of the literary and theatrical audience in English-speaking countries, the authentic black voice was a highly exaggerated vernacular or dialect voice. Not only did blackface minstrelsy, as Eric Lott and Michael Rogin have demonstrated, provide white immigrants a means of acculturating to American society, but, as Louis Chude-Sokei has argued in a study of the life of Bert Williams, the Bahamian-born performer who achieved fame as a black-faced vaudevillian, "blackface masquerade was as much a means of negotiating relationships between and among diaspora blacks in Harlem as it was an attempt to erase the internationally projected racist fiction of the 'stage Negro' (or 'darky') from within the conventions of popular performance."¹⁸

The rise of vernacular criticism in the 1980s renewed the idea that linguistic difference guaranteed the distinctiveness of black literary production, and that this distinctiveness characterized black expressive culture across the New World and Africa. Building on the work of scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams (*Talking Black*, 1976) and Geneva Smitherman (*Talkin and Testifyin*, 1977), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argued in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) that black expressiveness in the New World was distinguished by rhetorical and theoretical practices, designated as “signifyin(g),” which he claimed to be related to, if not strictly derived from, Yoruban divination traditions on the African continent. Gates suggested that black everyday speech was characterized by the verbal resourcefulness exhibited in such acts as “playing the dozens,” an exchange of insults in which each speaker tries to one-up the other with locutions valued for sonic inventiveness. This distinctiveness was created by each speaker’s revision of the other’s utterance, a principle that Gates then ascribed to black authors working in more formal literary genres who, he argued, develop their works through formal revision of works by their “black” literary predecessors. In an echo of Hurston’s claim that “Negro folklore is not a thing of the past ... [but] still in the making,”¹⁹ Gates observed that continued de facto segregation of black populations in impoverished urban centers had led to the ongoing reproduction of a distinctive black discourse that could guide exegetical practice while simultaneously constituting the expression requiring expert exegesis.²⁰

At first glance, the literary and scholarly responses to the identification of “black” with “vernacular” appear to be bifurcated, with one line roughly following the track laid down by Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and the other headed more or less in the direction taken by Schuyler. Arguments of the first sort tend to credit minstrelsy’s idea of black cultural and linguistic difference but fault that form for its blatant racism, which accepted stereotypes for reality and insisted on black inferiority. The destination at the end of this track is a rich account of black folk culture attesting to the resiliency, humanity, and creativity of black people in which folk expression operates as a synecdoche for the whole of the race. Arguments of the second sort tend to concede certain depictions of cultural difference but to contest claims that these differences are representative of blacks generally. The goal of this second line of emphasis has been to establish the authenticity and representativeness of black middle-class individuals whose achievements served to vindicate black capacity and to view the achievements of this class as evidence of black equality. What makes this bifurcation more apparent than real, however, is that writers and scholars along both lines have presumed to one degree or another the corporate reality of a race awaiting either its quintessential expressive voice or the interpretive apparatus

best suited to that voice. In practice, then, the two responses have been opposite sides of the same coin of black cultural distinctiveness.

For example, the rise of “local color” writing in the late nineteenth century, in the form of brief sketches or short stories written for periodicals and magazines highlighting regional or local differences in everyday speech and practices, contributed to the trend of anchoring black difference in linguistic difference or dialect speech. Famously, when William Dean Howells, the most influential American editor of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, wrote the introduction to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), he singled out the volume’s dialect verses over its poems in “literary English” as “divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now finds, for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretation of a very artistic completeness.”²¹ The rest of Dunbar’s literary career has often been read as a tragic attempt to escape the critical limitation imposed on him by Howells’s well-intentioned but condescending assessment.

James Weldon Johnson’s 1928 essay “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” argued that the problem facing Dunbar was common to all black authors in the United States, who necessarily confronted the challenge of writing, in part, for a white audience that viewed the Negro as either “a singing, dancing, laughing, weeping child; picturesque beside his log cabin and in the snowy fields of cotton” or “an impulsive, irrational, passionate savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of culture, sullenly hating the white man, but holding an innate and unescapable belief in the white man’s superiority.”²² Johnson insisted that talented black writers could conceive and produce works that would manage to reach, without pandering to, white and black audiences alike, that, given the expectations these writers faced, the task would indeed be daunting. While avant-garde white writers in the 1920s could incorporate elements of black dialect speech as a means of breaking from bourgeois cultural and linguistic standards, their success “made life more difficult for African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers like McKay, Toomer, and Hurston.”²³

Notwithstanding these difficulties, we now credit various black writers of the twentieth century as having, in different ways, resolved the dilemma described by Johnson. For example, in two of his novels Claude McKay thematized the tension between the black elite and the black working class by drawing a relationship between Ray, an educated, aspiring black Haitian writer (who is one of “ten millions of suppressed Yankee ‘coons’,” but “not entirely of them” because he possesses “another language and literature that they knew not of”²⁴) and, respectively, the lusty, Southern-born, working-class

Jake Brown of *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Banjo, aka Lincoln Agrippa Daily, the easy-going panhandling musician of *Banjo* (1929). Important to this depiction is the serious treatment McKay devotes to the blacks of lower-class status – an attitude that also characterizes work of other writers during the period, even when their fiction and poetry do not represent the black middle class. For example, Hughes's poetry of the 1920s, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Sterling Brown's 1932 book of poems, *Southern Road*, exemplify the notion that no contradiction exists between high artistry and the expressive practices and products of blacks from the laboring classes. Even in fictions focused more centrally on elite classes – works that include everything from Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* or *Tar Baby* – characters with ambitions to achieve “higher” social status nonetheless grapple with the apparently ineluctable pull of cultural or racial identification that seems more natural to characters on the lower rungs of the social order.

In the 1960s and 1970s black writers sought to bypass Johnson's dilemma by rejecting the protocol of addressing a white audience altogether. Taking a cue from Hughes's expressed indifference to the responses of white and black middle-class audiences to the work of younger black artists, Addison Gayle, who included Hughes's “Racial Mountain” essay in his edited volume *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), along with others of the Black Arts Movement, attempted to center black cultural production on the needs, desires, tastes, and styles of black communities. The valorization of the music and other cultural artifacts produced by those further down and the assertion that forms of expression were somehow truest to the identity of the race betray a strong degree of anxiety that with modernization and the social defection of the black bourgeoisie (or alternately the undue influence of that group) who ought to serve as stewards of black culture, a vital element of black life was in danger of being lost. This anxiety surfaced in the celebration of black folk culture during the Harlem Renaissance and reemerged in a somewhat different form in the 1960s. In the 1920s black writers worried that, as rural blacks were increasingly lured to the cities, the very group that had produced and kept alive various forms of black expression would no longer feel they needed them and thus fail to reproduce them. As Jean Toomer lamented in describing the impulse that had prompted him to write *Cane* (1923), “I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out ... The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert.”²⁵ Likewise, despite Hurston's assertion that black folklore was continually being produced, her motivation in such texts as *Mules and Men* (1935) was preservationist. Her goal was to

collect tales that might otherwise go unremarked and unvalued. Urbanization and the economic upheaval that prompted massive migrations of black people not only from the Southern United States but also from throughout the Caribbean were increasingly being viewed as eroding the material basis for black cultural distinctiveness. Claude McKay's novel *Banana Bottom*, which chronicled the consequences of the penetration of market forces into the peasant economy of Jamaica, includes in its pages a white character, Squire Gensir, whose function in the text is to facilitate native appreciation for the black culture of Jamaica, as he tells Bitá Plant, the novel's protagonist, "your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin. You ought to learn to appreciate it as I do mine."²⁶

During the post-Civil Rights era, in part as an effort to account for ongoing socioeconomic disparities between blacks and whites, and in part as an effort to produce an account of black identity not centered in notions of essential racial difference, a variety of writers found it helpful to privilege the past as playing an active role in shaping the present. The rise of what have been termed "neo-slave narratives," that is, those contemporary novels that reproduce the form of nineteenth-century slave narratives (see Chapter 14), was one manifestation of this renewed engagement with the past. But major projects of cultural memory, undertaken by Toni Morrison in the novel and August Wilson (see Chapter 19) in the theater, perhaps best exemplify efforts to make the process of coming to terms with the past via literature the center of black cultural identity in the present. If, in the estimation of many writers and scholars, music had been the vehicle for cultural continuity among blacks throughout their sojourn in the New World, by the 1980s Toni Morrison was asserting that it had fallen to novelistic fiction to take on the role of producing a sustaining "village" culture once performed by other forms of expression. Morrison observed that in the past, "Music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore."²⁷ Importantly, this literary coming to terms with history demanded not only that writers, to quote Alice Walker, search for their "mothers' gardens," but also that they acknowledge how much of the experience of blacks in the New World, from the moment of capture on the African continent, through the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement, and to the violent enforcement of segregation, had been nightmarish. Accordingly, to insist on the importance of the past in the present also meant considering that the present remained in some ways haunted by this past in the form of what has been called elsewhere in this volume "traumatic memory."

Morrison's nine novels take up this problematic in various ways. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), portrays the devastating emotional and

psychological outcomes when Southern-born blacks were coerced into surrendering the norms and values of that had guided their own lives in favor of the “white” norms valued by dominant society. *Song of Solomon* (1977) describes a project of cultural archaeology in which following the obscured threads and tracks of family history becomes a means of discovering the history of blacks in the American South and their connection with an African past as well. *Beloved* (1987), the novel that helped Morrison secure the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, asserts the need for blacks to come to terms with the atrocities committed against their ancestors, and with the self-inflicted physical and psychic wounds that occurred in response to the inhumane treatment entailed by slavery.

Again, while the turn to traumatic memory was intended to function as a way of distinguishing black experiences and black literature from the experiences and literatures of other Americans, it has also served to highlight the continuities between the experiences of blacks and other groups. The notion of trauma, as it has been elaborated in the works of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, author of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), has been used as a way of framing the broad history of the twentieth century as defined more by wars and acts of genocide than by progressive movement toward realizing the common good. Morrison’s dedicating of *Beloved* to the 60 million and more who perished in the Middle Passage is a direct allusion to the 6 million Jews killed during the Holocaust. In this light, the problem of narrating a history pockmarked by atrocity is not unique to the African American condition but exemplary of the situation of millions of people not only in the United States, but across the world.

Piecing together a usable and possibly therapeutic past then becomes the work of literary recreation. And while the foregoing discussion has privileged the novel, African American theater has figured prominently in the project of exploring the possibility of black distinctiveness through imaginative recreation of African American history. Dramatic works, including Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1969), Amiri Baraka’s *The Motion of History, and Other Plays* (1978), and Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), all in some way engage the psychic difficulties of living with the past as a black person in the New World. And while it would not be quite correct, given the differences among these playwrights, to label any one work as exemplifying a common enterprise, it may be justifiable, given the monumentality of the effort, to see the late August Wilson’s ten-play “Pittsburgh Cycle,” composed from 1982 through to his death in 2005 as illustrative. These plays attempt to portray black life through each decade of the twentieth century, and, like Morrison’s work, they derive in part from what Wilson, in a *Paris Review*

interview, describes as his fear that there had been a “break” in the traditions of black culture in the United States and that in response it was paramount to illustrate to blacks, “You don’t have to go to Africa to be African. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States. It’s our ancestral homeland. You don’t need to make that leap across the ocean.”²⁸ The Pittsburgh of Wilson’s cycle becomes a locus for exploring this continuity.

It is too early to tell whether or not the prospect of locating or recuperating black cultural distinctiveness will remain central to the project of African American writers in the twenty-first century. The presence of blacks has been decisive in shaping the culture and society of the United States. Indeed, in what may be her most important critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Morrison argued that the major works of white American literature from the nineteenth through the twentieth century are indelibly marked, in their strategies of characterization and in their formal structure, by the presence of black Americans. One inference to be drawn from Morrison’s work is that African American literature may be best understood in relation to American literature more broadly. Nonetheless, it is arguable that if the term “African American” is to retain any salience as a literary designation for contemporary literature (rather than stand simply as a historical marker for previous efforts), black writers will have to remain invested in some notion of cultural distinctiveness or they will have to inflect their work through the persistence of racial disparities on the American social scene. Indeed, as many scholars continue to insist, despite the waning of overt forms of racial oppression we are still far from the moment when race can be declared a null force on the American social scene. Even so, if racial inequality constitutes the basis of black difference, then the end of inequality, which is presumably something we would all welcome, would also portend the end of any significant cultural work for African American literature, as a collective enterprise, to perform. As noted in the remarks on Schuyler at the beginning of this article, such a possibility has been voiced in a minor key throughout the history of black literature in the United States, but it has been the idea of black difference that has proved most compelling to African American writers and scholars.

Notes

1. George Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” *Nation* 122 (June 16, 1926): 662–663.
2. *Ibid.*, 662.
3. Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 27–30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), pp. 357–547; p. 365
6. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *Writings*, pp. 815–826; p. 820.
7. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* p. 537.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 538
9. Du Bois, Review of Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 222, Winning Both the War and the Peace (July 1942): 226–227.
10. E. Franklin Frazier, “The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil,” *American Sociological Review* 7.4 (August 1942): 465–478; 477. www.jstor.org/stable/2085040.
11. Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 11.
12. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 187.
13. Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* [1945], in *Later Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1991), pp. 1–365; p. 259.
14. Ralph Ellison, “An American Dilemma: A Review,” in John F. Callahan (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), pp. 328–340; p. 339.
15. Michael Collins, “What We Mean When We Say ‘Creole’: An Interview with Salikoko S. Mufwene,” *Callaloo* 28.2 (2005): 425–462; 429–430.
16. Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” [1934], in Napier, *African American Literary Theory*, pp. 31–44; p. 32.
17. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 21.
18. Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky”: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 8–9.
19. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” p. 36.
20. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xix.
21. William Dean Howells, “Introduction,” in *Lyrics of Lowly Life: The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Citadel Press, 1984), pp. xiii–xx; p. xix.
22. James Weldon Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (eds.), *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 378–382; p. 379.
23. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 195.
24. Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* [1928] (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1987), p. 155.
25. Jean Toomer, “Letter to Waldo Frank,” in *Cane*, ed. Darwin T. Turner (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 142.
26. Claude McKay, *Banana Bottom* (New York: Harvest Books, 1974), p. 125.

27. Michael LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in Danille Taylor-Guthrie (ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 119–127; p. 121.
28. August Wilson, "August Wilson: The Art of Theater 14," Interviewed by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, *Paris Review* (Winter 1999): 1–28; 11, 12.

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